

Pure Suburb by emmablownguns

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Summary:

With Jonathan at NYU, and Nancy at UIC, Steve has been feeling pretty lonely in the little town of Hawkins.

1. Chapter 1

Steve took a defiant drag on his cigarette, waiting for the nicotine to rev up his blood. It was his lunch break, but instead of eating he was out here with the other smokers trying to get their daily fix. They were all much older than him, with thinning hair and a lifetime of baggage they were desperately trying to smoke off. Steve watched them carefully and wondered how he'd become so boring practically overnight.

He threw his cigarette onto the wet pavement and crushed it under his foot before heading back to the mail room, back to the monotony that had gotten him into this position in the first place.

Well, he supposed that wasn't really fair. Steve thought the whole thing had really begun after graduation. He had never been too sure if college was exactly for him, and his whole senior year he'd watched Nancy and Jonathan hastily fill out their applications as he let deadlines slip by, never bothering to send off his test scores or even take any in the first place. If people asked, he said he was saving up for an apartment to live on his own before trying college, but truthfully he didn't really have any concrete plans after graduation. When his father offered him a job in the mailroom where he worked, Steve couldn't think of a good enough reason to turn down the offer.

He had thought a job of his own would be his ticket to freedom but even so, being free doesn't make you happy. Becoming boring had been a slow process, with the results only making themselves known when he realized his coworkers were all twice his age, and the only people he considered his friends were spread out across the country.

Nancy and Jonathan had danced around the subject of college their entire senior year and the summer following. They'd never really confronted him about it, but Steve could tell they pitied him. It was evident in the ways they'd avoid eye contact whenever the topic of college came up, the way they stifled any excitement about leaving Hawkins in order to somehow spare Steve's feelings. Maybe he should've just let them know it didn't bother him, but he wasn't entirely sure that was the truth. He'd known for awhile that things

were going to change after graduation, but he hadn't expected it to be like this.

Somehow fighting a monster had solidified the trio into becoming actual friends, and soon they couldn't get enough of each other. Jonathan and Steve got on well when there wasn't a monster chasing them, which was as surprising to him as it was to Nancy.

Speaking of Nancy, he was never quite sure what they really... *were* after everything that had happened. They'd never officially "broken up" but they had never been officially together either. Steve had apologized somewhere along the road, but they'd never openly and candidly discussed what they were. Yeah they still kissed occasionally, but he also caught her eyeing Jonathan when she thought no one was looking. However, she never wavered in her affection towards *him* , and so Steve thought that was just as good. When graduation had finally arrived, the ensuing summer vacation was glorious. They were rarely seen apart. Back then, all they had wanted to do was be near each other, labels didn't matter. Whatever they were, he liked it, and he didn't want to give up her or Jonathan for anyone else.

At the end of that summer they'd all promised to keep in touch when they went off to college, but when it came to actually following through on all the things they promised, it just didn't work out how any of them had planned. Collect calls and postage stamps turned out to be expensive, and both Jonathan and Nancy needed the change for more important things, like laundry and calling their parents. After all, Steve was just a friend, right? They wouldn't want to waste their change on him, or at least that was how he tried to rationalize it.

What went from weekly calls quickly diminished into every other week, then just sporadically through the month, and then he was lucky to hear from either of them at all. When they did call, their conversations were filled with awkward silences and hurtful proof that they were moving on without him. They always cited Christmas break as a time to catch up, and even though it felt like a flimsy excuse, Steve had to believe that they were telling the truth, because otherwise he didn't have anything to hold on to. The only people left in town were complete strangers to him, but since it was a small town like Hawkins, they were the worst kind of strangers. Sure he

still saw people from his class who were friendly enough, and people's parents said hi to him at the grocery store, but none of them ever called, and Steve felt more alone than ever. He ended up making a surprising amount of enemies when he blew off Tommy and Carol, but it hadn't really become apparent to him until Jonathan and Nancy were gone. All he'd needed was them, and now that they were in college he didn't know what to do.

It would've been easier had they both gone in state, but they both went to schools so far away that Steve couldn't possibly visit them over just a weekend, and neither of them could make it home for the shorter breaks like Thanksgiving.

It was this distance that kept him up at night, wishing he'd talk to Nancy about what they were. Were they technically still together? Were they ever? He laid awake on most nights, wondering if she'd met anyone that she was dragging back to her dorm room. Was she kissing someone else out there in Chicago, her mind far away from Hawkins and the maybe-boyfriend she'd left behind?

His thoughts suddenly shifted to Jonathan, as they often did when he thought of Nancy, and he wondered if he too had met anyone. Steve couldn't think of a reason why Jonathan's love life should bother him so much, but it did. That night, he'd been so close to calling Jonathan or Nancy, but he hadn't wanted to bother them. People didn't exactly want to talk to the past when their new lives were working out.

Despite the spotty phone calls, when Jonathan or Nancy did call they were always very friendly. Steve didn't know when he started to realize that Jonathan and Nancy talked to each other more than him, but it probably trickled in just like every other realization. It would be in the small ways they'd start talking about people Steve didn't know, or telling stories about places he couldn't even imagine, and when he'd ask them to clarify they'd always say something along the lines of "Oh, I thought I told you this." They hadn't, and it hurt a little more each time they said it, but he was just trying to pretend he was okay. Maybe if he could pretend everything was fine, soon enough he would believe it too.

One night however, Steve slipped up.

He'd been having a rough day at work, and coming home to an empty house hadn't helped much, by the time his phone rang he'd been having himself a particularly intense pity party.

The piercing ring of the phone echoed through the empty house, and he'd had to peel himself out of the comfortable nest he'd made for himself in his bed to pick it up. He took a deep breath before answering, drawing the blanket he'd brought closer around himself and attempting to sound like he hadn't been crying.

"Hello?" It came out a little hoarse, so he cleared his throat. As he did he missed the caller identifying themselves. "Wait sorry, who is this?"

"Sorry, I said it's Jonathan."

"Oh, hi." Steve replied weakly, his heart giving a confusing little leap at the sound of his voice.

"Are you sick? You sound funny."

"I, uh," Steve sniffled, scrubbing at his eyes and shaking his head, "Yeah, I might be coming down with something."

Whenever he talked to Jonathan or Nancy it always served as a reminder of the distance between them, and Steve often hung up feeling worse than before he'd picked up the phone. He'd still answer every time, mostly because he didn't want them to squander their change, but also because he wasn't quite sure what he'd do without their phone calls. He barely heard from them, which made every call exciting as well as heart breaking. Right now, he felt too vulnerable to deal with this sort of thing, but he forced himself to push on and listen to what Jonathan had to say anyway, as Steve didn't know when he'd get a call like this again.

"I just wanted to call because I had a free moment. Are you busy?"

"Oh, no!" He responded, perhaps a little too zealously, "I mean uh, I just got back from work, so I'm free."

"Oh right, I forgot you don't really have homework anymore." Jonathan chuckled, and Steve felt his insides twist uneasily as tears

threatened to spill over again. He really wasn't in a good place to talk to anyone right now, but he missed Jonathan. *It had just been a good natured comment*, he told himself, *just relax*. Steve pulled the phone away from his ear, taking a deep breath so Jonathan wouldn't hear him.

"How have you been?" He asked through gritted teeth, his hands shaking ever so slightly.

"I've been really good, actually. I just took a final for my English class so I..." Jonathan laughed nervously and didn't elaborate further.

"Oh, that's..." Steve furrowed his eyebrows, unsure of how to respond to that, "Cool."

"I'm really sorry I haven't called, finals have just-"

"No, it's okay. I understand." He cut him off quickly, not wanting to hear Jonathan's floundering excuses, "You've got a whole new life up there, after all." Steve hadn't meant for his words to come out so bitter, but he was afraid they did.

"Oh. Yeah." Jonathan said, his tone clipped and sounding further away than ever.

There was a long silence over the line, which didn't help elevate Steve's mood one bit. He felt a couple of stray tears running down his face and dug his nails in the palm of the hand that wasn't holding the phone. *Great job genius*, Steve thought, *you've lost another friend. How many is that now?*

"Steve are... Are you sure you're okay?" Jonathan sounded really worried, and it only made everything worse. Steve sighed, wiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand, as if it would stop the steady stream of tears. What was he supposed to say? I hate that you're going to your dream school, come back to this hokey town? He was afraid if he said anything that his voice would shake and give him away, so he pulled the phone away from his face, and took another deep breath.

"I could be better." He said it as evenly as he was able to manage, trying his best to sound like his world wasn't falling apart at one phone call. "It's okay, though. I don't want to bring you down."

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, Byers." And Steve really should've won an oscar for that one, because it actually sounded convincing. He cleared his throat, changing the conversation as quickly as it began,

"So, wait it's finals there? Does that mean you're coming back soon?"

"Uh, yeah it's..." Jonathan sounded confused, as if he were still processing the sudden change in conversation, "Yeah this weekend I'm taking the greyhound back."

"Really?" Like an excited puppy, Steve perked right up, putting his miserable emotions to the side, a part of him glad he didn't have to talk to Jonathan Byers about why he was crying on a Monday evening by himself.

"Yeah, then I'm on break until January 15th." Jonathan chuckled, relishing in Steve's obvious enthusiasm, "I'm actually getting in pretty late Saturday night... I'm gonna be on the bus basically all day."

"When do you get here?"

"It's about 11 hours? I think? So I get in at like 11:30 or 12 at night."

"That sounds awful." Especially considering the only greyhound station was buried deep in the labyrinth that was downtown Indianapolis.

"Yeah, I'll make it through." And Steve got the feeling that if Jonathan were here he would've given one of his patented Byers shrugs, the kind where you could tell he was trying to downplay just how difficult he had it. His heart lurched at the thought.

"Do you need me to pick you up from the station?" Steve couldn't hide the hopeful tone in his voice. He wanted to see him as soon as possible, there was so much he wanted to talk to him about, but

mostly he just wanted to *see* one of his friends again and prove to himself he actually still had one.

“Oh, my mom said she can pick me up.”

“At midnight?” Steve asked, trying to cover up his disappointment, “Won’t she be tired?”

“I... Guess so? But I mean... So will I?” Jonathan sounded confused and defensive, as if he didn’t know where Steve was going with this.

“I’ll tell you what, pal.” He cleared his throat, trying to sound as dignified as possible, “Tell your mom to stay home, let her get some rest. I’ll come get you from the station, okay?”

“Wait, really?” The confusion in his voice almost made Steve regret bringing it up, but he carried on.

“Yeah, I stay up pretty late anyway. It’s no problem at all.”

“Well... I guess that’s okay, but only if you’re sure?” Jonathan still sounded uncertain, which was making Steve pretty uneasy despite the plans they were making, but he decided to put it out of his mind for now.

“Why wouldn’t I be sure?” He said, feigning surprise.

“I... I don’t know.” Jonathan replied distantly before another silence settled over their call. Steve could feel that loneliness from earlier creeping back up onto him, and he definitely didn’t want that to happen again, so he broke the silence with the most inane thing he could think up.

“That wasn’t the real reason you called, was it?” He chuckled a little, trying to sound casual and definitely *not* nervous at all. Since when had it become so hard to talk to people?

“No that...” Jonathan cleared his throat, “That isn’t the only reason I called,” He said it a little defensively.

“Okay.” Steve said, not quite knowing what else to say. “Well I-”

“You still-”

The line went silent again, each waiting for the other to speak.

“Oh sorry, you go.” Jonathan said finally.

“No, go ahead.” Steve insisted.

There was another pause on the line before he finally followed through.

“I was just going to say, you kind of avoided telling me what was wrong earlier.”

Steve’s stomach lurched, his hand tightening against the phone. He felt not unlike a child getting caught lying. It wasn’t like he was trying to be dishonest, it was more that he just didn’t have the language to talk about his problems with people. Talking to people about his problems seemed inconceivable, it was a bone he must’ve been born without. Steve just couldn’t stave off that feeling of being a bothersome child, slinking off shamefully to lick his wounds by himself. That sinking feeling of someone you care about feeling exhausted by you was a feeling he’d become well versed in ever since he was a kid, it couldn’t simply fade away like nothing.

Jonathan never made him feel that way, but it was just because of this that Steve held off on sharing too much about him. Especially now, as the phone call had been going surprisingly well, why should he ruin it with his bullshit?

“Steve?” Jonathan’s voice sounded concerned, and it brought Steve back to the current conversation.

“What?” He wasn’t sure what else to say, but playing naive seemed the safest option. There was another long silence, but Steve could still hear Jonathan’s breathing on the other end. Somehow, it was comforting.

“Just...” Jonathan began, before sighing and restarting, “You would tell me if something was wrong, right?”

And oh, there it was, a question with the answer the asker wanted

conveniently built into it. It was the kind of pitying question he'd been avoiding ever since Jonathan and Nancy had moved out of Hawkins. This should've felt like an invitation to talk about how he felt, but Steve could sense it probably wasn't a good time. In addition to that, his problems wouldn't really be problems in a week. Just as soon as he saw Jonathan, it would all be okay, so why upset him more than was absolutely necessary?

"Right." Steve assured him, sounding more confident than he felt, "I'm totally fine."

The call meandered from topic to topic until Jonathan had to go, as 10 o'clock in Hawkins was worlds away from 11 o'clock in New York.

"And if you need *anything*," Jonathan had said, his voice firm and full of promise, "*Please*, tell me, okay?"

Steve had been caught off guard, but managed to offer him reassurance that nothing was wrong. When Jonathan was apparently satisfied with his answer, they parted ways and hung up.

That night, Steve felt more shaken by this phone call than any of the others before.

Maybe he should've been happy with himself for getting out of having an emotional conversation yet again, but something in him felt different after this call. The possibility that Jonathan would be different when he came back occurred to him belatedly, but it was entirely likely. What if he wasn't the same brooding, quietly brilliant artist that he'd been over the summer? College changed people, it made them become entirely different people. Steve worked in a mailroom and didn't feel like he'd done any growing at all. What had he done since graduation? He certainly hadn't moved out of state, made someplace else his home. He wasn't working on getting a degree, making connections and applying for exciting internships. Nancy and Jonathan were already more exciting than he'd ever be, and what if they returned to home only to find they'd outgrown Hawkins, and Steve along with it? He returned to the nest of blankets he'd made in his bed and wondered how sleep would ever be possible with so much on his mind. Much to his surprise, however, he fell into a leaden sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, apparently

exhausted by this day's high stream of emotions.

2. Chapter 2

Steve knew he was in trouble when he woke up to the phone ringing. He almost never got calls when his father was away, as most business associates knew to call the number applicable to wherever he'd been whisked off to that weekend. If it wasn't for Steve's father it was for his mother, who gossiped nearly endlessly with her friends, but even they knew when she was out of town. Either way, Steve just didn't get calls meant for him, so this was out of the ordinary.

He was initially going to let it ring, convinced that it must be some telemarketer hounding him for money, but eventually he realized it must've been important because whoever was calling would just not give up. There were only a handful of people it could be, and an even smaller handful of people it could *realistically* be. Steve groaned, climbing out of bed and ambling down the hall to answer it. He figured he might as well pick it up to at least tell whoever was calling to give it up and let him sleep.

"Hello?" He said, trying to hide the grogginess in his tone with a well placed cough.

"Hey, Steve." Nancy's voice shocked him to full attention, and he leaned against the wall for support as he gripped the phone tighter.

"Oh, hey Nancy." He replied coolly, trying to hide his surprise, "Why are you calling so early?"

"It's noon?" Nancy sounded confused, like she'd be furrowing her brows at him and giving him an inscrutably judging look if she were here. On bad days, Steve even missed her glaring at him. *So much for heading back to bed*, he sighed internally at the thought.

"I knew that, obviously I knew that." He chuckled, trying to keep the conversation light. Receiving a call like this was instantly suspicious.

After all, it couldn't be coincidence that Jonathan had called and tried to get him to talk about his feelings, and then Nancy just decided of her own accord to drop Steve a line? No, this wasn't coincidence, there was clearly something going on between them that

he wasn't privy to, and Steve wasn't having that at all. If Nancy was calling to ask him if there was a problem, he would just do what he always did: deny, deny, deny.

"So, what's the story?" Steve asked conversationally, "Or did you just call to say hi?"

"*You* are the story, actually." She replied bluntly, diving straight into the issue, "Jonathan is worried about you."

One thing that never changed about Nancy Wheeler was her transparency. No matter what the issue was, she'd confront it head on. It was quite admirable, but Steve only wished he could say the same thing of himself.

"What? Why?" He said, and at this point it was almost laughable how good he was at playing a convincing imitation of surprise. Unfortunately, having been caught off his game by this unexpected call, Nancy saw right through his performance.

"Please." She scoffed, "I know you. I know what you do."

"What I *do*?" Steve sputtered indignantly, "Geez, what exactly do you think I do, Nance?"

"Avoid talking about your feelings, like you're doing right now."

There was that transparency again. He laughed dryly, too caught off guard to be entirely offended. It wasn't like she was wrong, this conversation was just going a lot differently than last night's. Steve didn't want to examine everything with Jonathan too closely, but it was all pretty absurd when you compared their friendship now to where it had started. They'd gone from beating each other up in an alley to Jonathan making collect calls to tell Nancy to check up on him. Maybe Steve should've been bothered that they were probably discussing his mental state behind his back, but a part of him was just happy to be the subject of their thoughts. They were always the subject of his, and besides, lately he'd been feeling quite ignored. However, the last thing he had ever wanted to do was trouble Nancy or Jonathan, and this was all really becoming much more of an issue than he intended.

“Are you okay?” Her voice softened with sincerity, and Steve felt his heart sink. “Really, you can tell me.”

He released a big sigh, long and pathetic like the deflating of a balloon. Well, he guessed he couldn't really avoid talking about it now. After all, Nancy didn't really seem like the type to be thrown off by Steve asking about finals. Jonathan had been so easy to corral into zipping it about Steve's feelings, but she did not seem so easy to appease. Nothing ever slipped by a determined Nancy Wheeler. It was becoming clear to him now just how different their tactics in getting him to talk were, and he was pretty sure that for the time being, her method was prevailing.

“I don't *know*.” He groaned into the phone, using his free hand to tousle his hair and trying to quash down the alarm at some loose strands flying free between his fingertips. There were too many things happening at once.

“You don't know?” Her voice sounded interrogative, but Steve could tell that underneath all that, Nancy was seriously worried about him.

He guessed he was worried about himself too, but Steve was still trying to hold off talking about this as much as possible, convinced it wouldn't lead to anything good.

“Well, I guess... I know what's wrong, but I...” He sighed, exasperated. “I don't want to ruin things.”

“Ruin... What?” Now she sounded genuinely confused, and Steve groaned dramatically. This was why he didn't talk about his feelings, they just didn't make sense over the phone. Or at all, really.

“When are you coming home?” The soft words bubbled up meekly from between his chapped lips, and Steve cringed at how weak he sounded.

Nancy sighed, “Steve, I really think we should talk about what's bothering you.”

“I know, and we will, but over winter break. Okay? I don't like talking about this stuff over the phone.”

The line went silent as she seemed to be weighing her options. Steve hoped this would buy him more time to process what he was feeling, and how he could answer to both of them about this. Mostly he was hoping their respective journeys back to Hawkins would be enough for them to forget about this whole debacle.

"I get back this weekend," Nancy punctuated her words with a sigh, and Steve brightened before she continued in a much firmer voice, "I'm really holding you to this, Steve."

"Yeah, yeah." He flapped his hand dismissively, despite the fact that she couldn't see him.

There was a silence that fell over the line, but this time it felt more intimate than the previous one. He could hear her soft breathing, a sound which usually would've only made the distance between them painfully more palpable. Right now though, it was just kind of nice. Steve was thinking about when he'd get to hear her soft breathing in real life, his mind abuzz with things they'd do, things he'd tell her.

"You know, I've missed you Nancy Wheeler." It was the tone of voice he used when he was trying to come off smooth and flirty, but like everything else, she saw right through him, letting out a soft chuckle that melted his heart.

"Oh my god." Nancy scoffed, but followed it up with a soft chuckle that told him she was still smiling. Steve could almost picture her rolling her eyes from all the way in Chicago.

They chatted amiably for a bit more, with Nancy carefully tip toeing around asking him about how he was doing, before she excused herself to her studies.

"Okay well, bye Steve." It came out uncertain, more a question than a statement.

"Bye Nancy." He said it with finality, trying to project across the phone that everything was okay.

An uncomfortable pause lingered on the line before she hung up, and Steve knew that under different circumstances, that might've been

where an "I love you" would've gone. He held the receiver in his hand and wondered if she was waiting to say it when she got back to Hawkins, or if that was her sly way of telling him it was over between them. Steve and Nancy were still friends, that was a no brainer, but their relationship was still kind of floating right now, and the strange phone call wasn't really assuaging his worries much. *And she accuses me of not communicating*, he thought as he wandered into the kitchen to fashion some sort of breakfast for himself. All morning or *technically afternoon*, he supposed, Steve couldn't take his mind off of that awkward pause for more than a couple minutes. His thoughts just kept returning to that singularity, out of everything. He ate his breakfast alone, and the sounds of his own chewing felt deafening in the empty house.

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Steve leaned against the hood of his car and smoked a cigarette in direct line of sight from the doors of the bus station. The drive from Hawkins to the city was negligible, but he'd wanted to be early just in case. The parking lot at the bus station was surprisingly empty, though there were still a few stragglers hanging around, no doubt waiting for their own family and friends.

Roughly every forty-five minutes, a couple of buses would hiss past the parking lot, heading around the back of the station to let passengers off. Each time, Steve would perk up, trying to search the dark buses and ensuing crowds for a familiar face. His hands were shaking, but he just chalked it up to the cold night and the nicotine, choosing not to read too heavily into what was making him anxious.

Eventually, he spotted him, and Steve's stomach fluttered at the sight. Shuffling alongside a crowd of people, Jonathan's hair had gotten a little longer, and he still had that light stubble that Steve had always teased him about. Nonetheless, he still had the same wary look in his eyes and that same rigid gait. A bit of worry clouded the back of Steve's thoughts, as Jonathan's face seemed more gaunt somehow as he headed towards the door, the bags under his eyes only magnified by the fluorescent lights of the crowded station. Was he sick? Tired?

Steve simply watched Jonathan for a bit, not making his own presence known immediately. He had told him he'd be waiting in the

parking lot, and Jonathan knew what Steve's car looked like, so it wasn't like he was totally on his own. He just wanted to quietly observe for a little bit, and felt he was due some precaution after that bizarre phone call they'd shared only a week ago.

Finally, Jonathan pushed through the double doors and looked up and down the parking lot, his eyes lighting up as they locked on Steve. That tired shuffle he'd had was exchanged for a quicker pace as Jonathan briskly walked over to him.

Steve cocked his head to one side, exhaling the smoke before tossing his cigarette on the ground and crushing it beneath his feet.

"Hey." Jonathan said softly, and his tone seemed to carry the weight of his entire journey with it.

"Byers." Steve replied coolly, nodding at his friend and jamming his hands into his pockets to hide the shaking. He wasn't sure why he was so nervous, but suddenly he was putting a whole lot of effort into looking wholly unaffected. Were he a braver man, he probably would've enveloped his friend into a warm hug, but Jonathan looked like the wind would carry him away, and Steve didn't want to overwhelm him. Much to his relief however, Jonathan's face did look softer outside the station, without the harsh lights highlighting every angle of his face he looked almost boyish, younger somehow in his exhaustion.

"Good to see you," Jonathan said, shooting him a small lopsided grin. Steve looked down at his feet to avoid thinking about the warm feelings that seemed to be lighting up his chest. *It's definitely the nicotine.*

"Well, I guess we should..." Steve said slowly, nodding at the car and heading around to the driver's side.

"Yeah, definitely," Jonathan replied as he hopped into the passenger's side and making himself comfortable, "I've had a long day." He chuckled, and it edged on exasperated.

Steve couldn't believe Jonathan had taken a 12 hour bus ride to be here, but he was just glad his friend was here now. Maybe he could

work through all the awkwardness he'd felt over the phone, maybe it would just disappear.

"Your hair's grown a little bit, I've noticed." He commented, shooting him a teasing grin as they started the journey home.

"Yeah I..." Jonathan yawned and shook his head, as if to rouse his senses, "I just got too busy to cut it in New York I guess."

Steve smiled ahead at the road, picturing Jonathan toiling away at his coursework, spending hours snapping pictures of the city and developing them in whatever set up they had at NYU. The thought almost made the distance okay, and Steve couldn't wait to hear more about his friend's college experience so far. Now that he was here to enjoy his presence, maybe it wouldn't be so hard to hear.

"Is Nancy back yet?" Jonathan's tone was hesitant and questioning, as though he weren't sure bringing up Nancy was okay just yet. It made Steve feel as though Jonathan knew something he didn't, but he shoved that aside and answered the question

"Yeah, she got back around nine, but she was tired from the trip and finals so I haven't gotten to see her yet."

"I know that feeling." Jonathan chuckled before clearing his throat, "But that's good she got in when she did."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, his tone edging on defensive.

"I don't know," He muttered back, giving a weak shrug of his shoulders, "We can all reunite at the same time, I guess."

"Oh." Steve said, "I guess that is good."

Jonathan hummed in agreement, leaning against the window and using his arms to cradle his head as he tried to get comfortable.

"You've had a long trip, Byers." Steve wondered if the fondness that crept into his voice was a little too noticeable.

"Yeah, but it's over for now," Jonathan chuckled softly and nodded, his head lightly thumping against the window as he did.

The rest of the car ride continued in silence, as Jonathan faded in and out of sleep and Steve focused his eyes on the road. It was only when he'd begun to recognize the street names and houses that he attempted to wake Jonathan, shaking his shoulder gently.

"Hey, we're back in Hawkins." Steve said, his heart hammering as Jonathan looked up at him blearily.

"Yeah?" He looked out the window as he rubbed his eyes, "Weird." His sleep addled voice was so endearing, and Steve had to hold back from smiling widely at him like a total idiot, though it didn't stop a small grin from peeking through.

He chuckled, "Has New York made you tired of this place already?" And even though Steve was playing it off as a joke, the question meant more to him than perhaps Jonathan realized. He supposed that wasn't really fair, but he doubted his friend would remember any of this after a long sleep.

"No it's just the..." Jonathan sat up a little straighter, looking up at the night sky, "You can't see the stars in New York. I... I missed them."

His voice was soft and reverent, almost as if one stray breath would disturb the night. Something about seeing Jonathan after all these months was having a strange effect on Steve. An unnameable feeling was curling in the pit of his stomach, and everything Jonathan said seemed to have a compelling edge to it. He found himself riveted by even the smallest little movements he was making, from the way he absentmindedly drummed his fingers against his leg, to the way he stared unwaveringly at the stars. Steve supposed he hadn't considered New York might have a lot more bright lights, but the way Jonathan was staring up at the sky, you'd think he'd been living underground for months.

"You'll get to see a lot more of it over break, pal." Steve said gently, "But for now let's just focus on getting you home." He hoped his friend wouldn't hear the slight tremor in his voice.

Jonathan shifted positions in his seat, hugging his legs up close to his chest and turning so that he was facing Steve.

"When are you seeing Nancy tomorrow?" His tone was suddenly quite alert for someone who seemed just on the edge of sleep not moments ago, and Steve perked up at the sudden change.

"I... I don't know," He replied hesitantly, "I was just going to call her when I woke up."

The light of a street lamp passed over Jonathan's face, semi-illuminating his penetrating expression in the near darkness.

"You should just let me stay with you tonight." And Steve opened his mouth to say something, a polite decline perhaps, but nothing came out.

"I..." He began, before closing his mouth again. His heart was racing like he'd been caught in a lie or something.

"It just makes sense," Jonathan continued, "We can both see Nancy together as soon as we get up." The way he said together made Steve shiver, and he gripped the wheel a bit tighter as he drove. Luckily, they were still on the outskirts of town and didn't have to make a decision quite yet.

"What... What about your mom?" Steve was stammering, unsure of just what he wanted. He had been so used to being alone, it was enough that Jonathan was *here* let alone asking to stay with him. It occurred to him belatedly that Jonathan had never spent the night over at his house before, just the two of them.

"She knows I'm with you. I can just call her tomorrow."

Even when he looked away, he could feel his friend's gaze lingering on him. The more Steve thought on it, the less reasons he could supply as to why it wasn't a good idea. Eventually, he had no reason not to give in.

"Okay, I guess you can stay then." He pointedly looked at the road, afraid of what he'd feel if he again if he saw Jonathan's eye light up like they had at the station. Apparently, that answer was satisfactory enough for him because he curled up against the window again and didn't say another word until they got to Steve's house.

“Are your parents here?” He asked as Steve unlocked the front door.

“I don't know, actually.” His parents were gone most of the time, and when they were around they usually paid him no mind. You'd think that working in the same office building as your father would warrant some conversation once in awhile, but that was apparently not the case. They'd always been distant, but once Steve had gotten a job and car, it had just eventually degraded to a point where they were more like roommates than a family.

“So, uh...” Jonathan nudged him gently, and Steve shuddered, unaware he'd been drifting off with his hand on the doorknob.

“Sorry.” He muttered, slowly entering the dark house. Steve fumbled for the light switch, stumbling over what felt like some shoes in the process. He turned on the lights to see Jonathan leaning against the door, his backpack slung over his shoulders and his hands in his pockets.

“I don't think they're here.” Steve said, moving the shoes to their usual spot out of the way. Jonathan simply nodded, his eyes focused on him and nothing else, as though he weren't sure he had permission to ogle his house.

Even though Steve's mother didn't do much around here, one thing that she regularly did with military precision was organize the shoe rack they kept by the door. After work, he would usually kick off his shoes and leave them wherever they fell, but if his mother was around she would always make sure to put them in their correct spot before the next morning. The fact that he'd stumbled over them was answer enough that she wasn't home.

“Oh, you can uh... Put your stuff in my room if you...” Steve trailed off, gesturing up the stairs and back at Jonathan, who simply cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow at him quizzically, clearly picking up how weird he was acting.

“Actually,” Jonathan began coolly, “Do you have anything to eat around here?”

“Oh, yeah. For sure.” Steve led him to the kitchen and gestured

vaguely in the direction of the pantry, letting Jonathan just have at it. "Take whatever, I don't care."

Later, after they'd both eaten something and headed upstairs, Steve had started to relax a little bit. Idly chatting with Jonathan about this or that had eased any lingering anxiety he'd had about letting him stay the night. Over the summer, there had been plenty of times when Jonathan had fallen asleep at Steve's house, but usually Nancy was there too, and they would all end up sprawled across the various couches in the living room. This was a totally different ballpark, and that combined with how isolated Steve had been, he wasn't quite sure he remembered how to have a sleepover anymore. He just tried not to let it worry him so much. After all, Jonathan didn't seem nervous, so why should he be? They were friends above all else, and it was really a wonder they hadn't done this sooner.

"I can take the floor," He said, nodding at Jonathan, "That bus ride probably wasn't so comfy, I'd imagine."

"No, it's okay, I can sleep on the floor," He insisted, shucking his backpack onto the ground, "I don't wanna impose."

Steve, unable to think of a way to refute that, let Jonathan make himself cozy as he climbed into his own bed. His exhaustion set in on him belatedly, but he still felt some lingering anxiety lurking at the back of his head. He still had so many questions for Jonathan about what college was like, still had so many stories he wanted to hear.

"Hey," Steve said, propping himself up on one elbow and looking down at Jonathan, "You know, we could probably both share the bed, if you want."

Jonathan looked back him, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Are you sure?" Steve was taken aback by the hesitation in his voice. He'd have thought they were better friends by now, that the idea of platonically sharing a bed wasn't so horrendous. Was he wrong? Had something changed?

"Well, you obviously don't have to, but I just..." Steve shook off his own caution, trying to look sure of himself, "Well, it would probably be easier for both of us. I feel kinda weird addressing the floor to talk

to you.” He chuckled, hoping it would casually punctuate his words and not further emphasize how awkward he felt. Jonathan looked at him for a bit more, before shrugging and scrambling up on the opposite side of the bed. Steve turned to face him, their faces just barely illuminated in the dark. Jonathan avoided looking at him directly, biting his lip as he thought.

“Is this okay?” His voice sounded soft and far away, as if the conversation they were having right now existed in a void. Steve felt his gut twist uneasily, afraid of the answer to the question he'd been asking himself all night.

“Yeah, of course, why?” Despite his unease, he was still trying to keep things casual.

“Back in New York, I uh...” Jonathan was biting his thumbnail now, as if trying to think of a way to say what he was thinking.

“You what?” Steve urged him on, sensing the importance of whatever it was he had to say.

“Well, I kind of...” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, “I French kissed my roommate.” Jonathan said it quickly, clenching his eyes shut as though he were cushioning the blow of the admission.

“Oh.” Steve replied, nodding slowly. He'd heard about Jonathan's roommate -- particularly how close they'd become -- but he certainly wasn't expecting to hear that they'd kissed. Steve felt like he'd been slapped in the face with this information.

“We were playing spin the bottle,” Jonathan continued, “Everyone just thought it was funny but I...”

“*Oh!*” Steve exclaimed, finally understanding where Jonathan was going with this. “You...” He trailed off, unsure of what exactly he should be feeling right now. A laugh threatened to bubble up from the back of his throat but he coughed around it to avoid hurting his friend's feelings. Jonathan finally looked at him and nodded, confirming what he was thinking.

An unspoken question regarding Jonathan's sexuality seemed to hang

between them. At some base level, Steve knew he was probably supposed to feel disgusted at the idea, but Jonathan had become one of his closest friends. It was hard to feel any measure of disgust for someone he'd gotten to know so well. On the entirely other hand, and one he was trying desperately to ignore, an undercurrent of want was wriggling its way through Steve's brain. The contradictions of his feelings swirled through his head, and he couldn't focus on anything, let alone crafting a coherent response. Just when he thought he'd gotten a hold of one thought, another tangled mass followed and stirred up everything he thought he knew all over again. Steve shivered, how had their conversation gotten so serious?

"I'm sorry," Jonathan sat up, looking down at him with that same solemn gaze. "I can go."

That snapped him out of his confusion, Steve sat up as well, finally speaking up.

"No, don't go." It sounded a lot like begging, but that was kind of exactly what he was doing right now. Out of everything, Steve knew he didn't want to be alone again, and Jonathan was his friend. Why should anything else but that matter? "I don't care who you kissed in New York, it doesn't even matter."

"What?" Jonathan's eyes widened in shock, and now it was his turn to be taken aback, "Even if..."

"I mean..." Steve paused, looking all over the room before locking eyes with his friend, "You know we're just friends right?"

"Of course!" He looked offended that Steve would even suggest that, but with the way Jonathan had brought this information to his attention, he figured it was a fair question. "It was just one time, anyway. I don't think I even..." He trailed off, nodding at Steve to mentally fill in the blanks. He chuckled, and Jonathan visibly flinched at the sound, as though he were expecting something else.

"Hey," Steve said, giving Jonathan's shoulder a playful punch, "Isn't college about experimenting anyway?"

"I guess so..." He replied, still uneasy about the exchange.

"I mean, who isn't curious about that stuff every now and again, right?" Steve laid back down, getting himself comfortable on the bed, Jonathan followed suit, still looking at him strangely.

"Right." He said, just above a whisper.

Steve was sprawled out on his back, watching the way the moonlight shone through his window and made patterns across the ceiling. He tried to use it as some sort of comfort to lull himself to sleep, but Jonathan's confession had awoken another part of him he usually liked to ignore, and Steve's hands were shaking under the covers.

Was it normal to be curious? He still had so many questions, but no clear way to word them. Steve had never learned the language of discussing sexuality, it had never been something he had to learn anyway. Now he wished he'd thought about this stuff more, but if started now, he wasn't sure it would lead to anything good. His own feelings were making less and less sense every day. He'd expected his friends return to normalize things a bit, but Steve was discovering that they were really just further emphasizing how *weird* everything had become. Now it seemed that all his hushed thoughts were catching up with him, ready to spring forward like a bear trap snapping shut.

Right now though, he couldn't stop thinking about that story. I mean, kissing another guy was a pretty big deal by itself. First of all, Jonathan had never been the type to play spin the bottle, let alone have an entire *group* of friends spin the bottle. On top of that, Steve couldn't really remember any parties in Hawkins he'd been to where two guys had to kiss. Usually when a guy would spin and it would also land on a guy, whatever group Steve was with would laugh nervously and declare a "re-spin." Jonathan didn't frequent parties, but they all grew up in the same small town. Boys weren't *like that* here, they just weren't. Was this sudden willingness to experiment a New York thing or a Jonathan thing?

"Was that your first kiss?" Steve asked, trying not to read too deeply into the sharp intake of breath from Jonathan's side of the bed.

"Y-Yeah..." He stuttered out, "It was."

“Wow,” Steve laughed, “That’s uh...”

“I know.” Jonathan replied firmly. “French kissing is so...”

“Wet?” He covered his mouth in an attempt to cover up his ridiculous smile, though he doubted Jonathan could see it in the dark.

“No!” He snapped back, sounding mortified. “French kissing is so *friendly* .”

“Friendly?!” Steve balked, “How was it *friendly*?”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan chuckled sleepily, “Everyone was watching, we were laughing. It just was.”

Steve shook his head in disbelief, “Well, your experience was kind of unique, people don’t usually have an audience for their first kiss.”

Jonathan simply murmured in response, and for a split second everything almost felt a little bit normal. In the dark, Steve could pretend they were just talking about kissing in general, the act itself without any pesky labels attached. He could write off everything, even what he was feeling.

Steve turned over so that he was facing away from Jonathan, still unsure if that was a good thing or not, and fell asleep lulled by all the things he didn’t want to think about.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Short and nothing much happens but this is kinda just filler to get me back into writing this stuff again... lol

Steve woke up to Jonathan's foot knocking him in the shin. He hissed, trying to keep his voice quiet and his pain even quieter as he inched his leg out of the way. Steve was usually a pretty heavy sleeper, but his shin had kind of become a pressure point ever since he'd slipped and knocked it on the floor at work. The bruise looked worse than it felt, and he'd actually forgotten it was there until Jonathan nudged it. Steve usually didn't have anyone around him to knock it in the first place, so it had kinda slipped his mind. Jonathan, who was always a light sleeper, opened his eyes and blinked back sleep before realizing he was the cause of his stirring friend.

"Oh, sorry." He whispered, his voice low and husky with sleep, "Did I hurt you?"

"No, it's alright," Steve rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm, "I just have a bruise there from work."

"From *work*? What happened?" Jonathan's tone was worried, his eyebrows scrunched together in concern.

"Nothing crazy," Steve smiled reassuringly back at his friend, "I just tripped over a box or something, it was more my own fault." He chuckled before running his hand through the snarls in his hair.

"Oh." Jonathan nodded, repeatedly rubbing his eyes and sitting up to lean on the headboard of Steve's bed.

"Are you working this semester?" Steve asked, looking up at Jonathan from where he was still laying sprawled across his side of the bed.

"Waiting tables," Jonathan groaned, rolling his eyes and wringing his

hands like he was about to start a particularly taxing shift.

“Oh shit, where?” He asked, like it would even matter.

“It’s just some family owned place a couple blocks from my dorm.” Jonathan flapped his hand dismissively, a satisfactory answer for Steve, who would probably never be anywhere near New York City, let alone Jonathan's dorm. It would be a miracle for him just to get out of this town.

“I think you’ve told me...” Jonathan began, sounding quite guilty, “But where do you work, again?”

“I woke in the mail room at my dad’s office.” Steve replied casually. He actually *had* told Jonathan before, but he didn’t really hold it against him for forgetting. Truth be told, Steve wanted to forget his job most of the time anyway. He sat up, kicking his feet over the side of the bed, stretching his arms and cracking his joints in the process. Jonathan made a vague murmur of dissent from the side of the bed.

“What?” Steve asked, turning to face him and cracking his knuckles one by one as Jonathan flinched.

“I hate that sound.” He grit his teeth to emphasize his point before continuing, “You’re falling apart.”

Steve laughed at the comment, nodding in agreement, but he couldn’t help but feel jolted by the underlying truth of that statement. He started picking at his nails absentmindedly, looking away from Jonathan and wondering if that comment had some double meaning he wasn’t entirely aware of. Steve was still trying to avoid having any emotional conversations, and he wasn’t sure if Jonathan had forgotten that weird call they’d had only a week or so ago or if this was his way of acknowledging it.

“Have you talked to Nancy?” Jonathan asked after a brief pause, sitting up and stretching out his arms as well.

“I mean, you just saw me wake up, so-” Steve stopped short when he heard the distinct sound of cracking joints, turning around to see Jonathan popping his neck and shoulders methodically. “Hey! You do

it too you hypocrite.” He grinned over at him, trying not to appear too mesmerized by the actions.

“Hey, I never said I wasn’t also falling apart here,” Another crack, Jonathan turned to face him, “Waiting tables sucks, man.”

“I can only imagine.” Steve said, nodding solemnly. He had never waited tables, was even informed -- rather forcibly -- by his father that that kind of work was beneath “Harrington men,” whatever that meant. As if being stuck in a mailroom all day was so much better than being chewed out by some angry New Yorker for some perceived problem with their food.

“What time is it?” Steve asked, standing up and looking down at Jonathan, “I guess I’ll call her.”

“Oh!” He exclaimed, hopping out of bed himself, “I actually have to call my mom, she’s probably super worried.”

“Oh right,” Steve nodded, and they both headed downstairs to where the phone sat, ominously silent. A thought nudged the back of his mind; *why did he even stay if his mom would’ve been worried?* He let it pass, willing himself not to over analyze it. They had both been tired last night, it had made sense for them to stick together!

It was just that... Last night, Jonathan had seemed softer somehow, less hesitant to speak his mind. The only thing that made sense to Steve about why Jonathan had told him he’d kissed his roommate was that they were both tired, but what if it that wasn’t it at all? What if was an NYU thing? What if Jonathan had suddenly become the type to experiment and share this kind of stuff with everyone around him? Was there more to the story that he wasn’t aware of? Steve couldn’t be sure, but something about the whole experience had felt very endearing to him, as being around someone on the verge of sleep was... Kind of cute? He didn’t even want to tackle that line of thought. Endearing was a slippery slope but *cute* was an even slipperier one. Steve didn’t think he could handle thinking of Jonathan as either, but apparently on some level he *could* considering the idea hadn’t once left his head. An uncomfortable feeling squirmed through the pit of his stomach as he caught himself already deep in over analyzing their conversation.

Jonathan picked up the phone first, quickly dialing the number and waiting for his mother to pick up. As it turned out, he didn't have to wait long at all, as she picked up on nearly the first ring. Steve drifted to the kitchen while Jonathan explained the situation to his mother, catching snippets of his explanation that echoed off the walls of the empty house. He scanned the cabinets, looking for something to make and coming up woefully empty. Steve knew Jonathan was adept at the art of making breakfast, so he resigned himself to a glass of water for now, hoping that his friend would be able to assemble the right ingredients to make something halfway decent.

Or fuck it, they'd just go to Waffle House.

Steve sipped silently, his mind drifting in and out of eavesdropping on his friend's conversation. It was taking longer than he'd thought was possible, but he'd imagine Jonathan's mother could really work herself up when she wanted to. (Or at least, that's what he'd heard) Eventually, Jonathan walked into the kitchen, fiddling with his shirt as he did. His clothes were wrinkled from having slept in them, and Steve supposed he looked just as disheveled considering he too hadn't bothered to change.

"What did your mom say?" He asked, nonchalantly taking a sip of his water.

"Nothing really," Jonathan shrugged, quickly continuing before Steve had a chance to reply, "We're picking up Nancy."

"What? Your mom said that?" Steve furrowed his brows in confusion, something that Jonathan seemed to relish in as the ghost of a smile seemed to light up his faces.

"No, after I talked to my mom I called Nancy and invited her to hang out. Can we go get her?"

"Oh yeah, of course." Steve nodded, putting down the glass as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, an action that Jonathan seemed to follow intently with his eyes. The action caused his hands to shake and he avoided eye contact, opting instead to look down at their feet.

“Is that okay?” Jonathan asked again, a little slower this time, “I just figured you weren’t uh...” He shrugged, letting Steve fill in the blanks himself.

It belatedly occurred to him that Jonathan hadn’t even really asked if he was free today, he’d just assumed. Steve wasn’t doing anything today, but when was he ever? Maybe it should’ve annoyed him it wasn’t like Jonathan was *wrong* either. All he did was go to work and come home.

“Yeah I’m not doing anything.” He finally replied, looking back up at his friend, which seemed to relax him just a bit. Steve paused, biting at one of his hangnails before continuing, “Do you think we could go to Waffle House?”

“Waffle House?” Jonathan chuckled softly, as if he’d said something funny, “Why do you wanna go there?”

“There’s just really nothing here to eat, you got any other ideas?” Steve said, feeling exposed and defensive.

“No, no,” He replied, Jonathan’s voice more cautious as he realized he’d accidentally offended, “Waffle House is good.”

“I’m gonna get ready to head out,” Steve nodded in Jonathan’s direction before turning to head up the stairs, leaving his friend to his own devices.

He supposed that wasn’t the best manners, but he was a little embarrassed at having snapped at Jonathan, no matter how easily his defensiveness had been shrugged. Steve was just lucky to have a friend as nonchalant as Jonathan, a friend who was just willing to let something like that go. In the bathroom he began his typical morning routine, falling into the motions easily and allowing his mind to wander.

In school, there had been this pervasive assumption that Steve was cool or charismatic, but that wasn’t particularly true. Growing up in a small town with everyone knowing each other, social interaction had become very calculated. Surrounded by the same people from elementary school to high school had allowed Steve to learn just how

everyone worked and fit together, as well as how to find his own niche. He learned rapidly that most people didn't care to know much about what he was actually thinking, and as such, Steve hadn't really learned how to be social past easy small talk.

Fortunately for him, small talk happened to be one of his strong suits, and it was this skill that would allow him to fake confidence for years. He wasn't an outcast, but he also wasn't so memorable that people could pick him out of a crowd. Steve floated this way between popular and forgettable for years, feeling content to never take too many risks on who he talked to.

It was only after breaking off his friendship with Tommy and Carol that people started paying attention to him in an entirely different way. Steve had only survived so long in the social ecosystem of Hawkins because of his apathetic nature. Once he started having something to defend, his classmates started seeing him in a new light and he realized just how ill equipped he was to handle unfamiliar social territory.

Once college started up for Jonathan and Nancy, he didn't even have them around to make him feel some small sense of normalcy. In the wake of their absences, Steve was finally grasping just how bad he really was at having interactions that weren't extremely calculated and familiar. It was why he avoided conversation with anyone else in the mailroom, why he smiled politely and said nothing as he delivered mail to the offices on the higher floors.

It was the main reason, Steve thought, as to why he had become so boring; he hadn't had a real conversation in months.

Jonathan roused him from his thoughts by poking his head into the bathroom and holding up his toothbrush in greeting.

"Room for one more?" He asked before coming in and grabbing the tube of toothpaste that sat open on the counter.

"Oh, yeah." Steve said, his mouth full of foam from the toothpaste. He nodded and scooted over a bit, making some room for his friend at the sink. They brushed their teeth in unison while Steve silently worried over his deteriorating social skills, hoping that he would be

able to hide it from his friends long enough to get a grip on it.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

it took like way too long to start working on this again lmfao

“I found another one!” Steve announced, presenting his findings from raiding the liquor cabinet.

He was never too sure how his parents had never noticed him sneaking drinks or stealing a cigarette or two from his dad’s pack, but once he’d graduated high school they’d started to get more and more lax on Steve drinking openly. His dad had even stopped commenting on him smoking outside the office every morning before he went in.

Jonathan and Nancy let out a half-hearted cheer, already way past sober and well into tipsy at this point to put much effort into acting normal.

“Hey, let me back in,” Steve said, putting the bottle he’d found on the coffee table in front of them and waiting for his friends to make room for him where they were sitting. They both scooted onto the arms of the couch and let Steve take the middle before squeezing back in. He didn’t know when they’d all decided to cram into the smallest couch -- aptly named the love seat -- but this was the closest he’d been to anyone in awhile, and that was enough to get him to tolerate the lack of space. Okay, maybe tolerate wasn’t quite the right word, as Steve was more than happy at the direction things had gone. Jonathan and Nancy’s legs were stretched over his lap, their feet tangling together and Steve was completely at the center of it all.

It was kind of amazing what kind of hilarity could ensue from three drunk kids watching shitty infomercials together, but here he was giggling with Nancy and Jonathan about “miracle solutions” to made up problems, which was far better than crying by himself as he’d been doing only a week or so ago.

Just this morning, he’d been worrying that things would be different between them, but now he could see that wasn’t the case at all. The

break had fortified their friendship, not weakened it.

“Been a long time, Steve Harrington.” Nancy had said when they got to her house that morning, squinting down at them through the passenger side window which Jonathan had graciously rolled down to get a better look at her. She’d looked just as crisp and put together as Steve remembered, still did now, even in her inebriated state.

“Yeah I guess it has, Nancy Wheeler,” He’d coyly replied, and slipping back into their old inside jokes had made Steve feel like they were back in high school again, like barely a day had passed since graduation. Apparently, his friends felt the same, as they hadn’t left his side since they’d all gone to breakfast that morning.

Steve hadn't been expecting much from this visit, resolving to let *them* set the pace and leave when they wanted to. Thing was, they never asked to be taken home. They’d stayed at Waffle House for as long as they were allowed by the staff, the conversation meandering from topic to topic. Sometimes they’d talk about school, and sometimes Steve would bring up his job, but eventually their conversations weaved together and became the same old banter they’d enjoyed that summer before Jonathan and Nancy had gone off to college.

Any lingering sadness or doubt Steve had been harboring disappeared with every chuckle at one of his jokes, or every time one of them playfully poked or shoved him.

Once they were tired of hanging around at Waffle House, Steve’s house had seemed the next logical step, and they’d spent a good couple of hours in his living room watching whatever was on TV. Steve had to admit he was surprised by all the attention; he’d figured that Nancy and Jonathan would want to run around revisiting all their old hang out spots. However, it turned out the opposite was true, much to Steve’s relief. The only thing they seemed interested in doing was lazily discussing whatever ridiculous commercial had just aired, which he supposed made sense. They were probably still exhausted from finals, some rest was definitely in order. Jonathan would even fall asleep occasionally, clearly still worn out from his long bus ride back to Hawkins, though he’d usually stay just coherent enough to still understand what Nancy and Steve were talking about.

Speaking of Nancy and Steve, he was still trying to figure it exactly what they *were*. Nancy hadn't talked about meeting anyone new back at college, but she also hadn't made any obvious moves. (Though, if Steve were honest, Nancy was never one to make the first move). He'd been glancing at her all day, trying to find a trace of that old admiration they'd had before. She wasn't any colder than before she'd left for school, but something was different about her and Steve was trying not to get too worked up about it. *At the end of the day we're always friends*, Steve assured himself, *just enjoy your time with her*. He supposed that was for the best anyway, if he second guessed everything she did Steve would *definitely* go crazy.

It was only when the sun went down that any of them even thought to raid the liquor cabinet, an idea that woke up Jonathan for good.

Now, seeing both of his friends smiling and being silly felt like salve on a wound. Over the summer, Nancy and Jonathan had always called him a sappy drunk because of how he got when he drank, but right now he didn't even care. He had to let them know how happy he was to have them around, god knows how much he'd needed something like this.

"Hey," Steve tugged on both of their sleeves to get their attention away from the television. No dice, he tried again, a little more forcefully, "Hey!"

"What is it?" Nancy asked, turning towards him, and oh fuck, she really was so cute when she was drinking. They'd only gotten drunk like this once or twice over the summer, but every time they did Nancy turned this adorable shade of red Steve couldn't get enough of. Jonathan turned to look over as well, an uncharacteristically warm smile lighting up his face.

"I miss you guys." Steve smiled at both of them, placing his hands at the small of their backs and pulling them close. The two groaned in unison, always the ones to shrug off sappy affection when it came from an inebriated Steve Harrington. This time, however, they didn't pull back. Jonathan mumbled something unintelligible into Steve's shoulder.

"What?" He asked, releasing Jonathan to get a better look.

"I said," He replied back slowly, a concentrated effort to not slur his words, as he looked up at Steve, "How can you miss us if we're right *here*?"

"Well whatever, *missed* I guess. Does it matter?" Steve giggled again, the laughter coming easier to him than it had in awhile.

"I think it does." Jonathan replied, feigning stubbornness.

"You're so..." Steve tapped his chin as he searched for the word, "You're so *scholarly* now that you've been in college. You're getting smarter already." Jonathan rolled his eyes and took a decidedly brooding sip of his drink.

"You're *wasted*." Nancy said to Steve accusingly, giggling into his shoulder and grabbing the sleeve of his shirt for emphasis.

"So are you!" He shot back, shaking his head and reclining back against the couch. "At least I haven't been asleep all day like *someone* we know." Steve playfully elbowed his friend.

"Oh yeah!" Nancy laughed, turning to Jonathan, "Do you *remember* what we did today?"

"Remember?" He sputtered, "Of course I remember. Do *you*?" They all merely chuckled in response, each of them too dizzy to pick up that thread of conversation. Steve reached for the bottle of whatever they'd been drinking, taking a sip straight from it in favor of pouring it into a glass. He offered the bottle to Jonathan, who looked at him like he was insane.

"What?" Steve asked defensively, his words slurring just a bit, "You'll accept a dude's tongue in your mouth but you won't share drinks?"

Jonathan's eyes widened as a tense silence seemed to fall over the room. Nancy, who'd only been half paying attention whipped around to look at both of them.

"Steve, *what* did you say?" She looked between the two boys, a hint of nervousness in her eyes.

It occurred to Steve -- rather belatedly -- that Jonathan might not

have told Nancy about making out with his roommate, might not have even wanted to tell *anyone* , and he had just blown his friend's cover.

"I just meant..." He began, trailing off as he wondered how to get out of this one. "Well, like."

"Wait, Steve." Jonathan cut him off, "It's fine. You can tell her."

So now I have to be the one to tell her? Steve thought, looking over at Jonathan. Trying to decipher the facial expressions of everyone in the room was making his head spin, and the alcohol was probably no help to this already awkward situation. With a sigh, Steve just decided to be as brief and casual as possible -- as that was probably what Jonathan wanted the most.

"It's nothing, Jonathan had just told me a while ago," He gestured to his friend to include him on the conversation, looking directly at Nancy as she ate up his words, "That he uh... Kissed his roommate? When they were all playing spin the bottle, right?" Steve turned to Jonathan, trying to get him to not be so fucking quiet during this conversation.

Nancy nodded studiously, quickly glancing at Jonathan before looking back at Steve. He could tell she was hiding her reaction, not wanting to offend either of them. Jonathan's silence was only making Steve tenser by the minute, and he really hadn't wanted to have this conversation in the first place, let alone while they were all drinking. It had been an accident that he brought it up, and it wasn't like kissing another guy was anything to be ashamed of, anyway. Hell, the thought had even crossed Steve's mind once or twice. It had just been a dumb party game, and yet the way Jonathan had gone utterly cold when Steve started telling Nancy about it, like he was tensed to be ridiculed, it was making the whole room awkward.

"Well, that's okay." Nancy said, always the reasonable one even when they were all drunk, "It's just spin the bottle, it's not like it means anything."

"It didn't mean anything, yeah." Jonathan agreed almost too quickly, nodding and shaking his head as if to clear his mind of the whole

conversation. Steve knew that wasn't what he'd said last night. He also knew that it hadn't been a quick peck, like he was making it out to be, but Steve didn't feel the need to bring that up to either of them. He just wanted this whole conversation to blow over, truthfully.

"Was that the first time you played spin the bottle, Jonathan?" Nancy was grinning now, slowly reviving the warm atmosphere they'd had only a couple minutes ago.

"Yeah," Jonathan smiled bashfully, looking away from her, "It was my first kiss too."

"They must be crazy up at NYU," She laughed, "What a first kiss that must've been!"

"That's what I said!" Steve interjected, relieved to be back on familiar territory.

Then Nancy launched into a story about when she'd played spin the bottle with some friends at college, pointedly making no mention of her own adventures in kissing strangers.

"Did you kiss anyone?" Jonathan asked, and Steve was just glad he didn't have to be the one to say it.

Nancy seemed to pause at this question, glancing over at Steve hesitantly before shrugging nonchalantly.

"Not really." She finally said, looking away from both of them, "I was kinda just watching on the side."

Steve wasn't sure how to interpret this one. Was her refusal to kiss anyone a sign she was still interested in him, or was he reading too much into things? The fact that she hadn't made any solid moves on him all night was proof enough that she didn't seem to be interested in him in that way, but her warm demeanor never faltered once. Sometimes, she'd brush up against him where she'd had no reason to, and Steve would find himself confused all over again.

He patted his pockets, feeling for the half empty pack he knew would be there before pulling it out.

"I'm gonna go outside," Steve said, though they would know what he meant, "Anyone wanna come with?"

Nancy wrinkled her nose and shook her head, still just as firmly against smoking as she'd been in high school.

"No?" Steve smiled at her teasingly, "You sure?"

"Completely sure." She assured him; He turned his gaze to Jonathan.

"Byers?" He held the open pack out to his friend who, after some brief hesitation, took a cigarette and followed him to the backyard.

"This stuff's bad for you, man," Jonathan said once they were outside, shivering and taking a drag.

"I know." Steve nodded, lighting his own cigarette and taking a long drag himself.

The hypocrisy of Jonathan scolding his smoking habit was not lost on either of them. He didn't often smoke, but whenever Steve would excuse himself for a smoke break Jonathan would faithfully accompany him to occasionally bum cigarettes and comment on how unhealthy they were. It was a ritual between them, a part of the rapport they'd slowly built up following the confusing months fighting That Thing. Steve had been smoking off and on since he was 13 but senior year was when he'd finally tipped the scale. He hadn't even been addicted before that week, but after everything that had happened, cigarettes were the only thing that calmed him down, Jonathan knew this. Steve had smoked them almost feverishly, trying to burn something out of him that seemed to stick to the back of his ribs, something that had wriggled into his brain and made its home there, ever since that night.

He knew Jonathan only came out here with him tonight out of pity, so he wouldn't be by himself in the cold. He might even be grateful for the charity, if Jonathan didn't lecture him about smoking, he didn't think he could handle it. Steve exhaled with a shiver, watching a puff of smoke float on the cold wind and fade away. It was sprinkling, but so far it hadn't really snowed yet, though it surely would soon with how cold it was.

"Sorry I told Nancy about..." Steve gestured vaguely, "Well, you know." He still couldn't bring himself to say it out loud.

"It's okay." Jonathan said after a pause, flicking the cigarette ashes onto the damp ground. "I guess she was gonna have to figure it out anyway."

Steve nodded, looking out at his backyard, past where the perfectly manicured yard gave way to gnarled, old trees that had been there since he was a kid. Back then, all he'd wanted to do was climb them despite the warnings from his folks about how unstable they were. Now, he desperately wished he could look at those trees without getting a chill, or thinking that they *weren't* just trees.

Jonathan and Nancy had moved away from their nightmares, Steve was still living in them. He took another drag.

"Would you have told her if I hadn't said anything?" He said it more to the trees than Jonathan, but Steve could see his friend glance over at him in his peripheral vision. There was a long stretch of silence before he finally spoke.

"I don't know," Jonathan sighed, "Weren't you the one who said it wasn't a big deal?"

"It's not a big deal." Steve replied defensively, turning to look at his friend. "It's just..." He trailed off. Was there a normal way to tell Jonathan that he couldn't stop thinking about it?

"Just what?" Jonathan didn't look particularly angry, just uninhibited. He wasn't holding anything back.

"Nothing, dude." Steve shook his head before continuing, "It's just new to me, okay? You know that stuff doesn't happen around here, at least nothing I know of."

"You know it doesn't change anything about us at all." Jonathan paused, "You do know that right?" His voice had an edge to it, he took another drag but Steve noticed his hands were shaking.

"Of course." He nodded empathically, "Of course I know that."

“Good.” Jonathan nodded, and another silence fell over the two of them.

The cold seemed to have sobered them up, or at least Steve felt that way. Even though he was hearing everything he supposed he’d “needed” to hear, he wasn’t feeling any better about the whole situation. If anything, he just felt worse. It wasn’t like it was Jonathan’s fault, what could he say? Steve was the one blowing the whole thing out of proportion. He didn’t quite know how to describe what he was feeling, wasn’t even sure it was completely warranted, but it would drive him crazy if he didn’t say *anything*.

Steve was never going to get out of this town, he liked to think he would, but it seemed very unlikely at this point. If he did, he doubted he’d have an experience like Jonathan, and so now was the only chance Steve would have to fully understand it, quash down any curiosity and nip it in the bud.

“I’m just...” He began, unsure of where to start, “I just have... Like, questions.”

“Questions?” Jonathan’s brows furrowed and he ran a hand through his hair, which had become defiantly tangled due to the lazy day they’d had, but Steve was watching his mouth, watching Jonathan take a drag and exhale, wondering what the kiss had been like. He knew it was probably creepy, or weird, or whatever, but he couldn’t look away. Steve was tired, and with the alcohol making his head spin and the nicotine making his heart race, he was a lot less concerned with what Jonathan would think if he noticed him staring. He had questions, after all.

“Yeah, like...” Steve took another drag, half to prepare him for what he wanted to know and half to buy him time to figure out just *what* it was he wanted to know, “Well, what’s it like to... kiss another guy?” Simple question, he reasoned.

“It’s, uh...” Jonathan took a long drag himself, probably for the same reason Steve had, “It’s good, I guess.” He finally replied, his voice subdued.

“You guess?”

"I mean, yeah," Jonathan chuckled, "You know that was my first kiss, there's nothing else to compare it to."

"Oh, right..." Steve wasn't sure what else he could ask, wasn't sure what was appropriate and what was crossing the line exactly. "What did everyone in New York say?"

"It wasn't a big deal to them, they're all these art students, grew up in the city," He cleared his throat before continuing, "No one really cared." And Jonathan's tone told Steve that he shouldn't either, he nodded his head and looked away, the message ringing loud and clear.

"Listen," Jonathan said after a while, shifting uncomfortably where he stood, "Now that everyone knows what happened, we don't have to talk about it anymore, right?"

"Right." Steve agreed easily, taking a final drag before tossing his cigarette onto the ground and crushing it beneath his feet. "No more talking about it."

"Thanks." Jonathan said, doing the same as Steve, "Because you're right, people around here just wouldn't get it."

Steve tried not to let that sting, because while he knew it didn't mean Jonathan liked him any less, his friends railing against their hometown flared up the nagging feeling that they were moving on without him. Back in high school they had all hated Hawkins, but in high school there's not much you can do but wait for your acceptance letters to get the hell out of there. To Steve, graduation had seemed far away, an abstract concept. He'd say he hated this town just as much as either of them, but now that Nancy and Jonathan were going to school out of state, their disdain for this place seemed more real to Steve than it ever had before. It was important to him that they still like their hometown just enough to at least visit him. The world was pretty big, Steve was beginning to realize, and if they completely turned their back on Hawkins -- whether or not it was intentional -- they were turning their back on him as well. He shook his head to clear these nagging thoughts, determined not to let the remark sting. *They're here now, aren't they? Enjoy the time you do have with them.*

“Hey, you okay?” Jonathan asked, watching him carefully, “Something on your mind?”

“No, I'm fine,” Steve lied, looking down at both of their feet, hoping his friend wouldn't see the truth, “Let's just go inside, okay? It's fucking freezing out here.”

Jonathan nodded, and without further question they rejoined Nancy on the couch.

For the rest of the night, up until the point they all passed out in the living room, Steve was nagged by the question of whether or not he wanted to talk about it again. Jonathan had made it clear that the kiss meant nothing, that it changed nothing, and while Steve knew this answer should satisfy him, he felt more lost than ever before. He went to bed that night surrounded by his friends, but he couldn't have felt more distant.

Steve only hoped he could hide it well enough.

5. Chapter 5

Steve was just about to smoke one last cigarette before he headed to bed when the phone rang. His mother dashed over to it, Steve opening the junk drawer and fishing for the pack of Camels he knew would be there.

“Harrington residence, who may I ask is calling?” He heard her say, feigning cheerfulness.

Steve rolled his eyes; he wasn’t sure why she still did that. He’d told her she could just say hello, to keep it brief, but his mother had been a secretary for years and so phone call etiquette was still of utmost importance to her. Nonetheless, the “Harrington residence” wasn’t as idyllic as her tone implied, and he wished she didn’t feel the need to pretend everything here was great when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

He had assumed it was one of her friends, or his father’s business partners -- he was never really expecting any calls -- which is why he almost missed her calling his name.

“What?” Steve asked, looking up at her incredulously, afraid he’d misheard.

“It’s for you,” She repeated, holding the phone out towards him, “It’s Jonathan.”

Steve strided over to his mother, taking the phone from her and balancing it in the crook of his neck as he fumbled with his cigarettes. She pretended not to see them as she left the room, having given up on chiding Steve for his smoking habit a long time ago.

“Hello?” He said, confusion in his voice obvious as he glanced at the clock. Nine-thirty on a Wednesday night. What did Jonathan want from him at this hour?

It had been a couple days since they’d all hung out, as Nancy had gotten roped into some family bonding and Steve had been working, as usual. He hadn’t expected his friend to call, especially at this hour.

“Hey Steve, your mom’s actually home tonight?” He could hear the teasing smile in Jonathan’s voice.

“Yeah, surprisingly.” He chuckled, then just decided to come right out with it, “So uh... What’s up man?” Steve didn’t exactly know a polite way to ask why Jonathan was calling, because there was usually always a reason.

“I just wanted to see what you were doing,”

“Oh, I’m just...” Steve looked down at the lighter in his hand, “I was just watching some TV.” He lied smoothly, not wanting to discuss his smoking habit with Jonathan over the phone.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” He paused, clearing his throat, “I was mostly wondering if you wanted to hang out?”

“Like... Now?”

“Well, yeah. If you... If you want to.” It sounded hesitant, and Steve was still in awe of how weird all this was. It was strange that Jonathan was even calling him right now to hang out, but it was equally strange how nervous he could get at the prospect of seeing Steve, as if they hadn’t practically lived at each other’s houses senior year. They’d done everything together, but in the rare event that Jonathan was the one who made the plans, it was like he was still that quiet, unsure loner he’d been when they first met. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

“Uh, well I just have...” Steve trailed off, unsure of what exactly he wanted to do.

Usually, he would’ve jumped at the chance to see his friend. Ever since they graduated every opportunity to hang out almost felt like their last. Steve was constantly worried that the one time he declined would be his last chance, and while the rational part of his brain knew that Jonathan was going to be in town until at least January, the less rational part of his brain insisted that he take every chance he could get to see his friend.

The only thing was, Steve had work tomorrow. On any other night

he'd just smoke a cigarette and head to bed, but the prospect of seeing Jonathan had shaken things up.

Now that his friends were back in town, it was really messing with Steve's weekly routine.

"Huh?" Jonathan asked, breaking the silence and interrupting Steve's train of thought.

"Well, sure we can hang out." He eventually replied, putting down the cigarettes and adjusting his grip on the phone, "Did you have anything in mind?"

"I actually uh..." Jonathan cleared his throat again, "I wanted to take some photos of the woods,"

"Oh." Steve clenched his fist tighter around the phone, a futile effort to stave off the shakes that were inevitable at the mention of going out after dark. Now he understood perfectly why Jonathan had hesitated when bringing this up.

"Where exactly?" Steve finally asked, hoping the tremor in his voice wasn't too obvious.

"I was actually thinking somewhere down by Lake Conifer, you know?"

"Yeah, I know the place." His tone had grown cold, and Jonathan could sense it.

"I know..." He sighed, then continued a bit more cautiously, "I know it's kind of freaky, okay? But it's been awhile since... You know."

"You want to take photos there?" Steve asked abruptly, veering the subject away from their past to distract from his obvious distress. Jonathan was talking to him like he was a skittish animal, and he seemed eager to redirect conversation as well.

"Yeah, my portfolio up at school is all city shots, I wanted to get some of the wilderness before I go back."

Steve listened half heartedly to Jonathan explaining his portfolio,

choosing instead to focus on the part that concerned him: going out after dark. Was that really a legitimate reason to risk it? A couple of shots for his portfolio? He just kept picturing himself out there with Jonathan, toying with the idea of being in the woods at night, even if it was with one of his best friends.

“Look man,” Jonathan said, seeming to sense Steve’s inner conflict, “I have flashlights too. It won’t be completely dark.”

He really did want to see Jonathan, but he wasn’t sure if he could handle it. The area around the lake wasn’t too bad at night -- no bad memories there -- but the prospect of being out after dark never ceased to fill Steve with anxiety. He was always wondering what was out there, when that thing would come back, and that was just when he smoked on his back porch.

“We won’t be too long, I promise.” Jonathan said reassuringly, “Believe me, I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t think I had to.”

Steve knew he didn’t know much about how art school really worked, let alone NYU, but he was pretty sure Jonathan didn’t *have* to risk his life going out after dark to get some photos.

However, that wasn’t any less puzzling to Steve. He knew Jonathan wasn’t a complete idiot, so why was he pushing this? Did he really need some photos, as he was saying, or was it something more than that? Steve wasn’t sure whether to feel flattered or nervous that Jonathan wanted to hang out with him, in the woods, just the two of them, but for the moment he just felt anxious.

“Please?” Jonathan tried one last time, sounding as though he were about to give up, “I don’t want to be alone out there.”

The realization that he would even try to go out into the woods alone was what finally broke his resolve. Steve sighed and tousled his hair nervously, unsure of which scenario would be worse: being in the woods after dark with Jonathan, or Jonathan being by *himself* after dark. Eventually however, the choice became clear.

“Okay,” Steve replied quickly, not even giving his voice the opportunity to shake, “Okay, I’ll go with you.”

“You will? You're sure?” Jonathan asked incredulously. He was shocked, but then again, so was Steve.

He didn't even know what he was saying, why despite all the anxiety he was determined to go. It made no sense, but on some level Steve was probably trying to do what he'd been attempting since they'd fought that monster: prove to himself that he was okay. If he could do this, he thought, then maybe it meant he was okay after all, that he wasn't actually as damaged as he felt.

Steve also knew that even if he said no, he wouldn't be able to get a good night's sleep wondering if Jonathan was okay out in the woods. He'd toss and turn all night, imagining his friend in the worst possible scenarios and probably not getting confirmation that Jonathan was okay until the next morning. In the end, it was probably better to lose a couple of hours of sleep just to make sure his friend was safe, no matter the cost for his mental health.

“Yeah, I'm sure.” Steve replied firmly, and felt like he was possibly the stupidest man on planet earth.

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They were in Jonathan's car, somewhere Steve hadn't been since the summer following graduation, and it was just another obvious sign of how long it had been since they'd really seen each other. He shifted awkwardly in the passenger seat, tightening his grip on the camera equipment Jonathan had made him hold. It jostled slightly as they went over a particularly underdeveloped part of the road.

“It's been forever since I've driven this car.” Jonathan remarked, echoing Steve's thoughts, “Not much need for a car in New York City.” He chuckled softly, seeming to sense how subdued his friend was.

“Yeah, definitely not.” Steve replied, looking ahead as the road seemed to light up under the headlights of the car.

Jonathan wanting to hang out at this hour only further emphasized how different their worlds really were now. Steve was in his element. He had a routine he'd stuck to for the last year and he didn't

tend to stray beyond that. In ordinary circumstances, Steve would've been in bed by now with his alarm set for 6 AM.

Jonathan was a whole other story.

He was on vacation, his sleep schedule messed up to the point where 9 o'clock was the early evening for him, and he tended to wake up late in the afternoon, when Steve would be on his lunch break. Jonathan didn't have any work to do, his job in Hawkins had changed from that of a busy teenager to a relaxed college student.

Steve wished he could say the same thing of himself, wished he had a defined role in this town outside of being an obvious failure, but these days he just seemed to drift from work to home on a seemingly endless loop.

"Wait." Jonathan squinted, looking closer at the area they were in, "I think I'm going the wrong way."

"Yeah, I think you took a wrong turn back on Montana Bend."

"I did? Why didn't you say anything?" Jonathan then began to take a wildly illegal U-turn, something that probably would've been unacceptable in any other town but Hawkins, which seemed to shut down almost entirely after 7pm. Steve might've been more alarmed if the road hadn't been totally empty, and if he hadn't been pulling that same stunt for years, figuring Jonathan was at least glad to be in a town with little to no traffic past 6:30.

"Well I wasn't too sure." He looked up at the full moon from the passenger side window, as though it would understand his anxiety, "I don't really leave the house much anymore."

Jonathan glanced over at Steve, saying nothing, and incrementally tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

How could Jonathan have forgotten where Lake Conifer was? They'd hung out there a couple times over the summer, but that wasn't the point. Hawkins wasn't a big town, it was pretty hard to get lost. Steve could picture the entire town if he focused hard enough. He'd lived in Hawkins his whole life, and with the way the old folks talked in this

town he'd thought that would've been a source of pride by now, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

Then again, those same old folks probably hadn't had to see what he'd seen; it'd make anybody want to run.

Jonathan losing his way in the town they'd both grown up in only served to heighten his anxiety, and it occurred to Steve belatedly that his friend's memories of this place had probably faded since he'd gone up to school. Steve couldn't say the same thing of himself, as he hadn't forgotten a single thing that had happened in Hawkins. It was hard for him to forget anything, especially when he drove by landmark after landmark every day, wading through memories just to get to work.

Steve was just too attached to this town, or else it was too attached to him.

Graduation was supposed to make everything better, it was supposed to be his ticket to freedom. However, if this year had been anything to go by, Steve's post-adolescence wasn't shaping up to be all that great.

He thought a job would've give him a sense of purpose, because as his father put it, at least he was doing *something* right? But his dull job with no clear path had only fueled his apathy, had only locked him deeper into the situation he'd created for himself, shuffling through his days like a zombie. Steve never thought working in a mailroom would've been this boring, but sometimes it really felt like his brain was dying, his next smoke break the only reprieve from the suffocating atmosphere of the office building.

Cigarettes were the only thing that made him feel briefly alive, and it was often the only way he could leave the house. In this way, his anxiety about being outside fed off of his cigarette addiction, which he worried was getting worse by the day. Now, Steve could rarely be seen outside not taking a drag or exhaling a large cloud of smoke.

Sometimes he felt like nothing made sense since he'd graduated high school, that after spending four years getting accustomed to his surroundings he'd just been thrust into another alien environment

where no one was around to help him.

This wasn't the life Steve felt he was owed, after all that happened to him he felt some success should come his way, right?

"Hey," Jonathan said, rousing Steve from his thoughts, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." He replied distantly, looking down at his lap, "I just have work tomorrow, so I can't be out too late, okay?" That sounded like a good enough excuse, and Steve hoped it would stave off having to explain away his apprehension.

"Don't worry, we won't be too long." Jonathan made a point of looking over at Steve and nodding at him, "Promise."

It wasn't like Jonathan wouldn't understand his fear, but he didn't seem to be as cautious as Steve was. *It's probably from being up in New York with all those adventurous art students*, he thought bitterly. In this way, Jonathan was trying to prove himself just as much as he was, but instead to people who wouldn't even know what he'd seen or experienced.

At least, Steve thought they wouldn't know.

He wasn't too sure if Jonathan had told anyone at NYU about the whole monster thing yet, but even still, he could tell that what they were doing right now was partially put on just for the story, for what Jonathan would tell his artsy friends when he went back to school. *Is that all I am to him now*, Steve thought, *just some backwoods anecdote?*

He shook his head in attempt to clear that dangerous line of thought. Steve ran the pad of his thumb over one of the grooves of Jonathan's camera, using it to ground himself in reality and distract himself from his anxiety that threatened to unravel everything. Obviously, Jonathan appreciated him, or else they wouldn't be doing this. Right? Steve was tired of being stuck in his own head, forced to listen to his anxieties rattle on. He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly and trying to focus on what was really happening instead of trying to read between the lines.

Right now, he was still nervous about going to the woods, but luckily the amount of equipment in his hands didn't lend itself very well to any trembling. Steve looked out the passenger side window and saw them pull up to lake, noticing how the reflection of the moon wobbled in the water.

Almost every kid growing up in Hawkins had been to Lake Conifer at least once or twice. Either with the boy scouts or with parents looking for cheap fun with their kids, it was a popular spot for almost anyone during the summer. Sometimes people would set up food stands, selling hot dogs and snow cones at insanely jacked up prices, knowing parents would be helpless to their kids begging for a snack. Now, however, the lake was dark and still; empty picnic tables were littered around the side of the lake facing the road. Beyond that, the line of trees on the other side of the lake seemed like a row of crooked teeth, grinning out at Steve and anyone who dared be in the area this late at night. He shivered, trying to dispel those superstitions thoughts.

"Here we are," Jonathan said, forgoing the parking lot and pulling right up behind a couple of picnic tables, "You're sure about this, right?" He sounded cautious, if a bit patronizing, looking at Steve like he was a hurt puppy.

"Jesus," Steve scoffed, rolling his eyes, "It's fine, dude. Really."

Jonathan nodded, taking some of the equipment from Steve's hands, leaving him one flashlight of his own.

"If I didn't want to, I wouldn't have come." He added, trying to prove to his friend that he was okay, that he really wasn't nervous at all. *Everything's okay*, he thought, hoping that if he repeated it to himself enough times it would become true. Steve was about to get out of the car when Jonathan stopped him, lightly grabbing the end of his sleeve to get his attention.

"Hey, look." Jonathan nodded in the direction of the glove box, reaching over and opening it so Steve could see what was inside.

"Is that..." He trailed off, looking over at Jonathan who nodded solemnly.

It was a revolver, Steve recognized it as the one they'd used over a year ago. Kind of hard not to recognize the thing considering he'd stared down the barrel of it once before.

"I also have a crowbar in my trunk." Jonathan said, looking at Steve solemnly. He wasn't quite sure what to say to that, but he nodded regardless.

"Just in case," Jonathan closed the glove box and shrugged, "Well, you know."

That seemed to work better than anything else, as Steve almost instantly relaxed. It eased his anxiety, however slightly, to know that they were prepared for whatever creature might decide to make itself known. In addition to that, he felt vindicated at the presence of the revolver, as it seemed like proof that he wasn't the only one still shaken up by the incident.

Jonathan was still recovering, just as Steve was.

Steve hopped out of the car, shivering at the cold night air and wrapping his jacket tighter around him. Jonathan followed suit and immediately got to work, fiddling with the settings on his camera and snapping a couple test photos at whatever he saw out in the field. Steve sat on one of the picnic tables, resting his feet on the bench and watching his friend meticulously position each shot. It was similar to what they'd done back in high school, with Jonathan the expert photographer and Steve just tagging along for the ride. Back then Steve would usually make a sly comment here or there, or focus his attention on Nancy if she was around. As of right now, however, he was just sitting on top of a picnic table clicking his flashlight on and off, too nervous to look anywhere but his feet.

"You know the battery will die if you keep doing that." Jonathan remarked, leaves crunching beneath his feet as he walked a few paces closer to where Steve was sitting.

"Is that really true?" He countered, smiling wryly down at the flashlight in his hands and clicking it off.

Though the moon was full and did a pretty good job of illuminating

the area, Steve was keeping his eyes trained low, afraid of what he'd see if he dared to look anywhere else. He could vaguely make out the shape of Jonathan's legs as he moved around the field, but the grass was tall and with the flashlight off it wasn't much more than vague shapes.

The crunch of Jonathan's footsteps against the dead grass sounded deafening in the silence, and Steve found himself lulled by the distant sounds of crickets accompanying the soft ebb of the lake, the occasional howling of the wind. Concentrating on just the sounds, the forest wasn't half bad. A small swell of hope fluttered in the back of his mind, wondering if maybe he'd conquered his fear after all.

Steve was so concentrated on the silence that he hadn't heard Jonathan turn around, edge closer to the picnic table he was sitting at, and snap a candid picture. Or at least, it probably would have been more candid if the flash hadn't blinded him. Steve let out a small cry, jumping at the sudden light flooding his vision and furiously trying to shield his eyes.

"Fuck dude, don't do that." He groaned, trying to look at his friend and blink away the bright spots clouding his vision. His heart was racing, the calm from before having been dissolved in only a couple of seconds.

"Oh shit, are you okay?" Jonathan said, moving closer to Steve to get a better look at him.

"God, I'm fine," He shook his head, releasing a long held breath, "Just ask for a picture next time, okay?"

"I'm sorry, I kinda forgot how blinding the flash can be." He looked down at the ground, then back up at Steve, his face barely illuminated in the moonlight, "I haven't taken that many pictures of anyone since I've been up in New York."

"Really?" Steve asked, "Don't you have a bunch of cool New York art students to have as models?"

"Not really," Jonathan shrugged, "Besides, I don't really take portrait photos anymore."

Steve was dismayed to hear that Jonathan had stopped taking portraits, as he had been convinced he would do something with that at NYU. Back in high school, he'd always joked that Jonathan was going to work for Vogue someday, snapping rich supermodels and traveling all over the world. That was mostly because back then he'd only ever wanted to take pictures of Steve and Nancy, shying away from any nature shots, which he had called "contrived and repetitive," whatever that meant. Though Steve had to admit that Jonathan had a point there, as his results spoke volumes. The portraits he took of his friends and family were so much more compelling than anything Steve had ever seen in nature. Now to hear that it had been awhile since anyone had been the target of his photography, Steve felt uneasy. First Lake Conifer and now this? The old familiar tug of wondering if his best friend was changing too quickly for him to catch up loomed in the back of his mind.

"I really got you there, didn't I?" Jonathan said softly, and Steve could hear him smiling even in the dark.

"I'm sure that'll be *great* for your portfolio." He quipped back sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

The calm atmosphere of the night had changed, and the following silence between them felt deafening for Steve, although he imagined Jonathan hadn't noticed it. Being out here was starting to make him feel antsy, any serenity replaced with an anxiety that pervaded everything. All he could focus on now was how cold it was, how hard this shitty picnic table was, and getting out of there as soon as possible. Even the things he'd enjoyed about the woods were quickly being ruined by his anxiety. Now, the howling wind was a monster's growl, the soft ebb of the river was the furious strokes of a creature about to breach the surface. Steve knew it was crazy, but that flash had really scared him, and considering how hard it was for him to get up the courage to come out to the lake, he was just hoping that Jonathan would be done with this soon so they could get out of here.

Eventually, Jonathan seemed to sense this because he joined Steve on the picnic table, setting the camera in his lap and reclining on the table, letting out a big sigh.

"Are you done?" Steve asked, looking down at his friend, who was

looking up at the stars. Jonathan looked back at him, but didn't answer, simply patted and dug through his pockets as though he were looking for something.

"Do you have a lighter?" He finally asked, still not answering Steve's question.

"Uh, yeah." He replied, pulling out one of the cheap lighters he always had in one of his jacket pockets, "I don't have any cigarettes though."

"That's okay," Jonathan said, sitting up to take the lighter from him, "Do you wanna smoke?" He'd said it quietly, studying Steve carefully as if there was someone out there to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Did someone in New York give you...?" Steve trailed off with a soft chuckle, wondering how long this had been going on.

"My roommate's girlfriend knows somebody so..." Jonathan shrugged, pulling a joint out of his pocket, "They'd smoke a lot."

"You *mooched* off of them is what you're telling me?" Steve chuckled, looking around the clearing to make sure it was completely empty. Not too many cars had passed by in the time that they'd been out there, but he still didn't want to take any chances.

"No, it's not like that," Jonathan chuckled softly, looking down at the camera in his lap before looking back up at Steve, "So do you want to?" He held up the joint to punctuate his words.

"Well..." Steve thought for a moment before eventually shrugging, "I guess I'm down."

It wasn't like they'd never smoked weed back in high school, but back then it was harder to find someone to sell it if you didn't go to parties, and with Jonathan's family always hovering, they had only smoked a handful of times when no one was around, and Steve was able to score some weed. Though as his friendship with Nancy and Jonathan developed, the times he was able to find any became few and far between and eventually, he just stopped going to parties altogether. Steve wasn't entirely sure what New York City was like,

but he reasoned that it was probably a lot easier to find weed there than in Hawkins.

Another reason they hadn't made a habit of it was that Nancy didn't want to be around the boys when they were smoking. It wasn't like either of them thought she was wrong for that either. Nancy was an honor student, she rarely had time to play around with that stuff even if she wanted to. In addition to that, she just thought it was gross. Nancy was willing to pass on Steve's cigarette habit, but weed was apparently where she drew the line.

"Cigarettes smell *romantic* ," She had said to the boys one afternoon, "Weed just smells like cat piss."

After she'd said that they had both pretty much stopped, as there was always this unspoken agreement between Steve and Jonathan to make sure Nancy was happy. Besides, they realized they'd rather spend their time with Nancy instead of scrounging around for a mediocre buzz. As a result, weed had never really become their substance of choice, which was primarily why Steve was surprised Jonathan was bringing it out again. Although, he supposed it wasn't that surprising considering where he'd just spent his semester.

"Do you think it's safe out here?" Jonathan asked, looking around the clearing, "I don't want to do it in my car."

So that was how they ended up on the ground, sitting side by side and leaning against one of the picnic tables with their backs to the road. Steve handed Jonathan the lighter, watching as he attempted to shield it from the harsh wind that had started to pick up.

"Is it lit?" He asked after he'd managed to keep the lighter going for a couple seconds. Steve squinted, but couldn't see any difference in the dark.

"I don't think so." He replied, looking down at his feet and absentmindedly tugging blades of grass from the ground. Jonathan sighed and tried again, the occasional snick of Steve's lighter nearly drowned out by the wind.

"Yes! Got it." Jonathan exclaimed, taking an enthusiastic drag on the

joint before passing it to Steve. Steve quickly followed suit, going through the motions that felt not unlike smoking a cigarette, a habit that he was well versed in. He held the joint out to Jonathan, attempting to quiet the coughing fit that threatened to bubble out from the back of his throat. His whole tongue felt coated in the smell of weed, and he couldn't help but feel like he was back in high school again.

Steve wasn't quite sure whether he relished in that feeling or not.

"When's the last time we did this?" He asked, pulling blades of grass apart in his hands.

"Did what, exactly?" Jonathan asked in between hits.

"Well..." Steve shrugged, "All of this, I guess."

"I don't know, guess I hadn't really thought about it." Jonathan turned his head into his elbow, clearing his throat into the sleeve of his jacket.

"It's probably been since high school," Steve sighed, "Before Nancy said it smelled like cat piss."

Jonathan chuckled, it sounded slow and raspy. He passed him the joint, Steve took a hit.

The pattern continued in this way for a couple more minutes as Steve felt a heavy weight settle over him, how much due to the weed he wasn't sure. To him, Jonathan seemed distant, just like he'd been all evening. Their conversation had gaps, and when they did talk it was often fraught with awkward pity laughs. It wasn't awful, but it was clear to Steve that they'd lost some aspect of the rapport they'd had back in high school. They were on different wavelengths now, and the realization twisted him up inside. It must've been some cruel twist of irony that he'd only see it when he was getting high, but there was a wall coming up between them and Steve didn't know what to do about it.

"You really haven't thought about it?" He asked cautiously, his voice just above a whisper.

“Thought about what?” Jonathan looked back at him, his voice a pitch louder and his gaze inscrutable. Steve could tell he was edging over some sensitive territory with this one.

“You really haven't thought about high school or any of that stuff?” He clarified his question testily, feeling emboldened in the dark.

He knew full well asking a question like that might offend Jonathan, but part of him didn't even care. Steve just had to know why, why they had left him, why they'd stopped calling.

He thought about it all the time.

“Yeah, I guess I still think about high school, but...” Jonathan paused, shaking his head, “What is this about, anyway?” He sat up a little straighter and turned to face Steve. They were sitting incredibly close, in an attempt to hide what they had been doing, but now it just made him nervous. Steve pulled up more blades of grass in an attempt to distract his hands from shaking.

“It's just...” He looked out on the lake, swallowing around the lump in his throat and shaking his head, “You've just been... off ever since you came back.”

There was a long silence before Jonathan said anything, and when he did, Steve could tell he'd made a mistake in bringing this up.

“How?” He asked, his tone clipped and devoid of emotions. Steve could see out of the corner of his eyes that Jonathan was still looking at him intently, but he couldn't return what he imagined would be an intense gaze, even if it was somewhat softened by the dark.

“It's like...” Steve trailed off, wondering how to word it, “It's like you don't belong here anymore, or you think you don't... or something.”

Jonathan looked down, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly. Steve wrung his hands, afraid of the conversation they were about to have. He shouldn't have brought it up, he'd just ruined the nice evening they'd been having. Though when he thought about it, Steve wasn't too sure it had even been that nice to begin with.

“If it seems like I don't belong here,” He began, sounding softer than

Steve had expected, "It's because... I don't know if I do anymore."

"What do you mean?" Steve looked over at Jonathan, caught off guard by his response.

"Every time I come back I've missed so much, with Mom, with Will," He sighed, looking away from Steve and out at the lake, "It's overwhelming."

"Oh..." Steve nodded sympathetically, "I understand."

"No, you really don't." Jonathan cut in suddenly, whipping back to look at him.

"What?" Steve blinked, looking back at him incredulously.

"You don't know what it's like to have to pack up everything and move to another city!" He snapped, crossing his arms tersely, "You just..."

"What?" Steve deadpanned, just as pissed off as he was, "Say it."

Jonathan bit his lip, studying Steve in the moonlight as he looked right back at him. His gaze was neutral, and Steve was just wondering if Jonathan would finally say what he knew everyone was thinking about him.

Finally, his friend spoke.

"You don't go to school, alright?" Jonathan shrugged, his tone beyond exasperated, "You stayed in town, so nothing changed for you."

"How are you so sure nothing changed for me?" Steve said, furrowing his brows in disbelief. He could tell his voice was getting louder, that he was getting worked up, but he didn't care. His face was red, partly from the chill and partly from the shock of talking to Jonathan like this. "You think Hawkins has been the same since you and Nancy left?"

"That's-" Jonathan began, but Steve cut him off, too wound up to stop himself now.

"It hasn't been the same, not at all. It's been *lonely*! Sometimes I'm just as overwhelmed as *you* are Jonathan." Steve stood up, wrapping his coat tighter around him and walking a few paces away from his friend. It was about time all this shit came out, he guessed. Steve couldn't stop shaking, but he didn't know what part of it came from the hurt he was feeling, and what part of it just came from the weather.

"New York and Hawkins aren't the same at all!" Jonathan shot back, his voice raising as he stood up to follow Steve, "You grew up here! We both did!"

"You think it's easy being here?" He turned back to face his friend, vaguely making out Jonathan's distraught expression in the dark, "I have *no one*!" Steve punctuated the statement with a light shove to his shoulder, barely enough to make Jonathan stumble, but enough to convey the intensity of his feelings.

"Steve..." Jonathan shook his head, his tone warning as he took a step closer.

"My parents are always gone, and... and even if they *were* around..." Steve released a shaky sigh, his voice becoming weighted with emotion and his breath visible in the cold, "I *know* they don't give a shit about me."

He looked down at the ground, his anger giving way to a piercing sadness, one that had been resting in the back of his mind for months now. He blinked rapidly in an attempt to stave off the tears that threatened to spill down his face. Steve wasn't really mad at anyone, he was just *sad*. He felt betrayed, by no one else but himself.

"And the worst part is," Steve continued, "I don't even know if I have *you guys*."

"*Of course* you have us, Steve." Jonathan's tone was calm, if a bit cautious.

Now that Steve's anger seemed to have cleared, his friend seemed intent on making sure it didn't flare back up again. It wasn't enough to pull him down from his somber mood.

“Just admit it.” Steve said softly, shaking his head, “Once school started, both of you just stopped calling me as much. It's-”

“That’s what this is all about?” Jonathan interjected, “Me not *calling you* enough?”

“Well, *yeah!*” Steve spat back at him, resentful of the way his friend’s tone seemed to imply he was stupid for feeling upset. “It fucking *sucks!* ”

“Steve, I’ve just been busy. When I’m not working, I’m studying, and it's-”

“So you can’t spare a couple of quarters just to say hi?” He sunk back to the ground, leaning against the picnic table as his momentary anger deflated once again, “You couldn’t even send a letter?” Steve was ashamed of how meek he sounded.

“Steve,” Jonathan began, squatting down beside his friend and placing his arms on both of his shoulders comfortingly, “It’s not that simple.”

“What’s so complicated about it?” Steve took a couple deep breaths, attempting to calm himself down.

“I have a lot going on with work, school, and friends. I don’t like you any less, it’s just...” Jonathan took a deep breath, taking his time releasing it, “It’s just time, really.”

“You and Nancy were the only people I hung out with...” Steve said mournfully, his voice obviously trembling and his face hot as he held back his tears.

“That was in high school, things are different now.” And even though Jonathan said it soothingly, to hear him say what Steve had been thinking for months only pushed him further.

“I know they are, but it’s just hard and I...” He said, furiously blinking back tears, “I’m just tired of being alone.” With that, Steve couldn't hold back any longer as tears began streaming down his face.

They crept down his cheeks slowly at first, gaining speed when he

felt Jonathan's hands stroking up and down his shoulders in an attempt to console him. In ordinary cases Steve might've shaken his friend off, but now he was just too wrecked to consider it, even if he had wanted Jonathan to stop.

"I know." His friend whispered, his tone understanding and free of anger, "I know."

"How could you know?" Steve sniffed, turning to face him, "How could you really know?"

Jonathan paused in his ministrations, and in the moonlight, Steve could vaguely tell that he seemed surprised at his tears.

"Before you and Nancy, I was alone for years. I know what it's like." Jonathan replied after a brief pause, returning to his task of running his hands up and down Steve's shoulders. "And I'm sorry." He punctuated the sentiment with a light squeeze of his shoulder, causing Steve to shiver just slightly. He nodded and wiped at his eyes, too exhausted to fight anymore.

Jonathan was his friend, he didn't want to be upset with him, it just hurt too much.

"It's... It's okay... I just..." Steve let out another shaky breath, his reservations about sharing his feelings far away, "I haven't felt like myself in a long time."

"I know." Jonathan nodded, reaching for Steve in order to draw him into a warm embrace, "Come on, I understand."

Steve, feeling exhausted and vulnerable, accepted the contact quickly and hugged back with more vigor than he'd ever had before. In any other circumstances, he wasn't sure he'd have been so quick to let his friend embrace him like this. However, Jonathan's arms wrapped around his torso with his head buried into his jacket was the first warm touch he'd felt in months. Steve wasn't about to waste it.

"I just want to have a good winter break with you guys." He half mumbled into Jonathan's shoulder.

"I know, Steve. We will." His friend assured him, the pads of his thumbs making small semi circles across Steve's back, "Don't worry about it."

But he *was* worrying, worrying that something about what they were doing was crossing a line. Steve knew he felt better having talked to Jonathan about this, but being so close to him was making him second guess all that. They were friends, right? This was alright?

"I'm sorry." He replied with a sniffle, pulling back to wipe the tears off his still damp face with the sleeve of his coat.

"Why are you sorry?" Jonathan seemed shocked he would say something like that, though in Steve's eyes, he'd just had a breakdown in front of his friend, something he usually reserved for his own private pity parties.

"I totally ruined the night, I made it awkward." Steve looked down at the ground, suddenly embarrassed about having let Jonathan see him cry like that. He wasn't sure he'd let anyone see him cry before, no matter how bad things got. Part of him was convinced he'd done something wrong by showing that part of himself to someone else, even if it was his best friend.

"No, *I'm* sorry," Jonathan shook his head, scooting closer to Steve, "I shouldn't have taken you out here."

"I've been thinking about all this a while." He confessed, feeling like he might as well come out with it since he'd come this far.

"Really?" Jonathan looked over at him in disbelief, and Steve felt a tiny sense of relief for having hidden his feeling so well for this long.

"I guess I didn't say anything sooner because..." Steve trailed off and shrugged, unable to explain why he always felt the need to put up walls, hide the parts of himself that felt too extreme for his friends. Jonathan nodded as if he understood, and the two sat together in silence, both lost in thought. Steve hadn't expected this when he agreed to come out here tonight, and yet, he couldn't find it in him to regret it. He felt he'd made some real progress with Jonathan, having shared a vulnerable part of him he wasn't sure he'd shared with

anybody. It had been a conversation that was long overdue, and the result of it was far from being as disastrous as he'd imagined it.

A particular frigid gust of wind blew through, making both boys shiver.

"Hey, do you wanna go?" Jonathan asked, pulling away to look at Steve, "It's getting kinda cold out here."

"Yeah, definitely." He agreed easily, standing up to brush some stray leaves off his pants, "Let's get out of here."

With Steve's help, Jonathan packed up his equipment and they both headed to the car, just anxious to feel some warmth again. Jonathan started the car and cranked up the heat.

"Give it a second to come on," He said, pulling out of the clearing and turning back onto the main road. They sat in silence for awhile, with Steve holding his hands together in front of the vent and Jonathan tapping the wheel, both boys attempting to bring some life back to their cold hands.

"So, do you want to go home or...?" Jonathan broke the silence once they were back in the heart of the town, which looked almost desolate at this time of night.

"Yeah, I should probably get home," Steve yawned, leaning his head against the window.

Jonathan nodded, following the route Steve used to get home from work everyday, although it didn't look as familiar in the dark. The stores were all shuttered and quiet, the only light on the main roads being the fluorescent street lamps overhead, but to Steve everything felt far away. His head felt clouded, and he couldn't seem to focus on anything for too long before losing track all over again. God, what time was it, anyway? He knew he probably shouldn't have stayed out this late, let alone smoked with Jonathan, but considering how the night had gone he supposed losing a couple of hours of sleep wouldn't be too bad.

At the very least, he hoped his mom wouldn't be suspicious of what

he was doing. She never really seemed to like any of Steve's friends, no matter how well mannered they were in front of her, and when he'd become friends with Jonathan that derision of who he hung out with only increased. He shuddered, hoping that she wouldn't be awake when he got home to lecture him.

"Don't you have work tomorrow?" Jonathan chuckled, rousing Steve from his thoughts.

"Mmm," He murmured with a slight nod, "It's past my curfew."

"Sorry I kept you out so late." Jonathan looked over at him, the ghost of a smile on his face. Steve said nothing, smiling back a big toothy grin he couldn't hold back even if he was sober.

Eventually, they pulled up to his house, and Steve felt his heart sink. He wasn't exactly being talkative right now, but he wasn't sure he wanted Jonathan to leave right away. Steve was going to be exhausted tomorrow anyway, so what was the harm in him sticking around for a little while longer?

"Do you want to go inside?" He asked bluntly no time to beat around the bush.

"D-Do I?" Jonathan sputtered, apparently shocked Steve would even suggest it, "Don't you have to get up early?"

"It's already pretty late," Steve shrugged, opening his door and gesturing at the house, "Just for a little bit? Please?"

Jonathan appeared to think over for a bit for he finally sighed, giving a quick nod of his head.

"Alright," Jonathan said, cutting the engine, and putting his keys into his pocket, "Alright, I'll stay."

And Steve could feel himself smiling that toothy smile again, but this time he didn't even care.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

i worked on this awhile omg. anyway here ya go. i feel like maybe i couldve edited this more but im also like..... ive written so much and edited so much so many times its just like .take it.

“Are you hungry?” Steve half whispered, fumbling around in the dark kitchen for the light switch. Finally he found it, flipping it up and bathing both boys in the amber glow from the lights.

“Sure, what do you have?” Jonathan asked, squinting as his eyes adjusted.

“Shit, we've got...” Steve opened the fridge, scanning its contents for something edible, “Sandwich stuff? That alright?”

Jonathan nodded, pulling out plates and knives like he lived there as Steve set out the various food stuffs on the kitchen counter.

“I’m not used to having to be quiet,” Jonathan whispered, “Usually your parents are never here.”

Steve chuckled softly, nodding at his friend without another word. Jonathan and Steve both made their respective sandwiches, occasionally passing each other the odd condiment or knife and trying to be as quiet as possible.

When he was in high school, Steve was known for being a bit of a loudmouth, a class clown type. He distinctly remembered some teachers wincing at his name when they called roll, wondering what kind of ruckus Steve Harrington would stir up for them that day. However, his home life was a different story.

The truth was, Steve was only so loud in school because when his parents were around, they expected the house to be completely silent.

It wasn’t like it was a completely unreasonable request, as Steve’s father was almost always taking an important phone call, but

somewhere along the way the family had become accustomed to living quietly. They rarely ate dinner together, and when they did it was often fraught with awkward pauses and half interested murmurs of no one really paying attention to each other.

When Steve's parents were gone, he played music, loudly singing along to each song with reckless abandon. It was like some kind of test for himself. Steve wouldn't be like his parents, stuffy and passive aggressive, if only he could hit the right notes or make someone laugh hard enough. When his parents *were* around, Steve felt suffocated. He'd listen to music with headphones in, tapping his toes to the beat and mouthing along to the words as quietly as possible. When he was courageous enough to venture out, it was as though he were an intruder in his own home. But mostly, Steve just stayed in his room. He *had* to get his own place soon. Being at home with his parents felt like tiptoeing around a sleeping dragon, and right now, he was desperately trying not to wake the beasts that slept in the master bedroom.

They were almost in the clear, just about ready to dash off when Steve brushed against Jonathan and for a second, their plates clinked. But it wasn't the twinkling of the plates that caught him off guard, it was his mother standing in the archway of kitchen, arms crossed against her paisley robe.

"Your father is trying to sleep." She said sternly, her voice soft but severe. Jonathan startled at the sound of her voice, having missed her entering the kitchen, and dropped his knife on the floor. It clanged loudly, damningly, and Steve winced at how loud it was.

"Sorry, sorry..." Jonathan sputtered nervously, rushing to pick up the knife as quietly as possible. She didn't even acknowledge him, instead training her caustic gaze directly at Steve.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Steve blinked, hoping it wasn't too obvious that he wasn't totally sober. "I know, Ma." He replied, his voice placating as he expertly disguised his inebriation. It came naturally, as he'd gotten pretty good at placating her, "We were just about to go upstairs."

"Don't you have work tomorrow?" She punctuated the question by shooting both of them -- particularly Jonathan -- a distrustful glance. This certainly wasn't doing any favors for him. Jonathan had always known Steve's mother didn't like him, but usually it'd only been dropped through subtle hints. Tonight however, she was overt in her disdain.

"We'll be quieter." Steve replied reassuringly, choosing not to answer her question so he didn't have to think about it himself. His head still felt clouded, and it was a wonder she couldn't *smell* what they'd been up to.

This answer seemed satisfying enough, as she wordlessly retreated back down the dark hallway and presumably, into the master bedroom. Steve jerked his chin in the direction of the stairs, motioning for Jonathan to follow. Both boys grabbed their sandwiches and headed to Steve's room.

Upstairs, Jonathan looked pretty uncomfortable about what happened. He kept shooting Steve these little bewildered looks, as if trying to confirm that he hadn't been the only one to see that. Steve supposed his shock made sense. It was no secret that his home life wasn't ideal; his parents were never around to begin with let alone to chastise him like a little kid. Steve sat on his bed, leaning against his headboard while Jonathan sat criss cross on the floor. Together the two ate in silence, with Steve focusing on quashing down his humiliation and Jonathan looking antsy. *Bet that never happens at NYU*, Steve thought, smiling down at his lap ruefully.

Eventually, Jonathan was the one to break the silence, talking in hushed tones around bites of his sandwich, "So, your mom hates me, right?"

On any other night Steve might've been shocked by the question, might've even disputed it, but tonight he was just too drained.

"Yeah." He replied solemnly, "She hates everything."

Jonathan nodded, his face giving away no expression. If he felt offended by Steve's bluntness, he didn't show it. With that, they plunged back into a thoughtful silence. Steve marveled at how an

evening could be so horrible and yet so worthwhile all at once, but here he was, simultaneously regretting and not regretting agreeing to see Jonathan. It didn't make sense, but then again, that had pretty much become the norm for him.

"Do you want me to go?" Jonathan asked once they'd both finished their meals, "I don't want to get you in trouble."

But Steve wanted to get in trouble, if only to highlight the absurdity of the situation he was in. He also didn't want Jonathan to leave, as pathetic as it sounded.

"No." He replied too quickly, before softening his tone, "I mean... I want you to stay. If you... want to."

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asked, not for the first time that night.

"Of course." Steve said firmly, "Who cares what my mom thinks?" The words had a finality to them, and he felt like a high schooler again for the second time that night. Again, Steve wasn't sure if he liked this or not.

But mostly, he just felt guilty. Steve didn't want to end the night with Jonathan seeing his mom snap at him like that. He was pissed off that she still had that power over him even though he was technically an adult, he was upset that she always put a wedge between everything he... loved. Steve supposed love was the right way to put it. After all, his mother had never been too approving of Nancy either. Every time Steve has brought her home his mother would just peek at them from a distance, her scowl saying it all. Later, when Nancy had left, she'd always try to sneak in a sly little dig about the Wheelers and Steve just had to keep his head down and put up with it.

There had been a time when Steve loved his mom, even preferred her to his dad, but after graduation it dawned on him that they were both from the same crazy stock. Steve's father was gruff and unavailable, and Steve's mother was miserable and passive aggressive.

Any love Steve found away from them, they found a way to ruin it. It was all he could do to shield Nancy from it when they were dating, but in a scary way, he kind of loved Jonathan too - at least enough to

want to protect him from his toxic family. It was a friendly kind of love, just as deep as his affection for Nancy, but from a different place in his heart. Nonetheless, Jonathan was a good friend, and through the distance and the petty squabbles that never changed. Steve felt guilty for ever questioning that, for not standing up against his mother, and most of all, for making the night so awkward with his stupid insecurities.

"I'm sorry about... Everything." Steve sighed, shaking his head and flopping sideways onto his bed.

"Everything?" Jonathan repeated curiously, standing up to brush crumbs off his pants before sitting at the foot of Steve's bed.

Steve sighed, leaning his head up, "Just... My mom freaking out on you, *me* freaking out on you."

"It's okay, Steve." Jonathan nodded, his voice low and calm as he looked down at him, "I understand." He lightly patted his friend's shoulder.

Jonathan was being so understanding tonight, catching every curveball Steve thought would be a deal breaker. Any other person might've ran, but not Jonathan Byers. He stuck around through Steve's tears, his suffocating parents, and wasn't that just perfect? The look in his friend's eyes seemed genuine, endearingly sincere. Steve had to look away.

"You must regret asking me to hang out tonight, huh?" He chuckled, addressing his question at the ceiling.

"No way." His tone told Steve he was grinning, "Don't worry about it."

Jonathan leaned back on the bed, both boys laying on their backs and looking up at the ceiling.

"So, how did you like that stuff my roommate gave me? Different from the shit around here?"

He cocked his head to look at him and Steve did the same, realizing how close they were and forcing himself to calm down about it. He

laughed nervously.

"I dunno," Steve began, resting his head against his arm, "I didn't take too many good hits because I was a little uh... distracted." He absentmindedly tousled his hair, his fingers making lazy swirls against his own head. Jonathan murmured an affirmative, nodding his head

"Well, there's still one more joint." He said matter-of-factly, patting his pockets for emphasis.

Steve glanced around the room as though his mother were looming. "In *here* ?"

Jonathan sat up, digging through his pockets for the joint, "You could open the window."

Steve knew that was a flimsy solution, that it would only do so much to mitigate smelling up his room with a scent that Nancy likened to cat piss, but he was still feeling anxious and a better option wasn't presenting itself so... Steve sighed, grabbing a handful of blankets to stuff under the door and hoping his job wouldn't decide to spring a surprise drug test on him.

They took turns taking hits and exhaling them out the window, but eventually they just gave up on trying to hide the smell at all, reclining on Steve's bed and passing the joint back and forth.

This time he knew what he was doing, he wasn't freezing from the cold, and Steve felt the difference almost immediately. With nothing on his mind, a heady calm slowly began to wash over him.

"Are you high?" Jonathan asked as they got down to the end of the joint. He was giving him a knowing look, but Steve didn't know what it meant.

In the semi darkness of his room -- with the only light coming from his desk lamp -- it looked like Jonathan was holding a glowing red dot of smoke and ash.

"Maybe," Steve shrugged, feeling vaguely like he was on the edge of getting there, "Well... Almost."

Jonathan nodded thoughtfully, taking what was probably his last hit before passing it to Steve. Steve mirrored his actions, taking a quick drag so as not to burn his lips.

"I can take that," Jonathan said, sitting up and holding his hand out for what was left of the joint. Steve handed it over, snuggling deeper into bed with a deep sigh.

Jonathan merely chuckled in response, turning from the wastebasket where he threw the joint away to Steve's collection of tapes stacked up against his stereo. "Wow, you've got a lot of tapes now." He commented, leaning forward a little to get a better look at them.

"Yeah, you can play one if you want."

Steve didn't make an insane amount of money from working in the mailroom, but it was surprising how much money you could save by being a shut in, and suddenly Steve had a lot more disposable income than he was used to in high school. Now, whenever he wasn't buying cigarettes he was spending all his paychecks on cassette tapes.

"The fabulous sixties?" Jonathan read, pulling the tape out from the stack and presenting it to Steve with a wry smile. "What's this, Steve?"

Steve could feel himself smiling too, wider than he was used to, but something about the look on Jonathan's face struck him as hilarious. "Are you gonna play it?" He asked, barely able to suppress the urge to giggle. Jonathan didn't answer, simply sliding the tape into Steve's stereo with a satisfying click and hiss.

"Hey, turn it down." Steve added last minute, remembering he'd previously had the stereo cranked up the last time his folks had been away. Jonathan obliged, turning it down to an acceptable volume before joining Steve on the bed again.

The sound of the old music filled the room, with heartbroken teenage girls and crooning old men alike broadcasting their woes, always accompanied by three perfectly pitched backup singers. Steve had gotten the tape at a place that sold used books and records, it had been the only thing that stood out among the store's sparse section of

cassettes. He wasn't even sure why he'd bought the tape, and wasn't entirely sure he'd actually listened to it before tonight.

“So are you like a stoner now that you're at NYU?” Steve asked, feeling loose and distant from what he was saying.

Jonathan snorted, angling his body so he was laying on his side, facing Steve. “Everyone in the arts programs are stoners.” He replied evasively, looking down at his own hands and picking dirt out of his nails.

Steve smiled teasingly and leaned forward, “That's a real clever way of dodging my question, Byers.”

Jonathan smiled back up at him as though he'd been caught in the act. “*Now* are you high?”

“Oh, definitely.” Steve replied without hesitation, fully letting his friend avoid the question. His head lolled up and down as he nodded, and both boys burst into a fit of giggles, desperately trying to keep quiet and only making it worse. Jonathan was so close, Steve could feel the bed rumble with his laughter. It was the first time he'd laughed like this in months, the first time he dared being so silly.

Eventually, their giggling fit came to an end, both boys gasping and sighing contentedly when the worst of it had passed. At some point, the tape had finished, and Jonathan got up to flip it to side B.

It was only when he had his back turned that Steve was able to say what had been on his mind all night. “You've changed so much being up at NYU, Byers.” And while his words might've been a bit confrontational, Steve's tone was affectionate, teasing him in some distant way. “You're a whole new guy.”

Steve hoped Jonathan could hear that he was still smiling.

“Maybe a little.” He agreed, joining Steve back on the bed, this time just a hair closer than before. “But you've changed too.”

Steve blinked rapidly, his eyebrows furrowing together. “I have?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan nodded his head limply, “You're... softer now.” He

was smiling too.

“Softer.” Steve repeated, not sure if that was supposed to be an insult or not. “Really?”

“Oh sure,” Jonathan leaned his head on Steve’s shoulder, his hair just barely tickling Steve’s chin. “Your day job has made you...”

“Boring?” Steve supplied, too relaxed to be defensive.

“Domestic.” The word vibrated against his chest. “Unfettered.”

“Are those SAT words?” He quipped back with a dry laugh, still not quite sure what Jonathan was getting at.

“Just forget it.” Jonathan shook his head, though it wasn’t a fluid motion with the way they were laying as he knocked his head against Steve’s chest lazily.

Steve couldn't remember the last time he had been this close to anyone, let alone Jonathan. He still didn't know what he and Nancy actually *were* but they didn't cuddle like this, at least not since she'd gone off to school. Guys in Hawkins didn't usually do stuff like this either, or at least no one he knew. Plus, Jonathan had always been the type of guy to shrug off even casual contact, opting for the cool and aloof approach as opposed to looking too clingy. But NYU had sanded down all of Jonathan’s sharp corners, and the usually uptight quiet guy was quickly being replaced with a bolder, more free spirited Jonathan.

“I miss you, like a lot.” Steve began, casting his gaze over at the stereo which was still playing his sixties tape.

“I know.” Jonathan replied, interrupting Steve before he had a chance to elaborate.

“But it's tough,” He continued, “Because like, I'm also really proud of you, yaknow?” Steve felt Jonathan shift his head to look up at him, but he couldn't return his gaze, “You're probably one of the coolest guys I know.”

“Oh man!” Jonathan exclaimed with a laugh, sitting up and bracing

himself on Steve's chest. "Look at how far we've come, Harrington. You think *I'm* cool." Steve finally returned his friend's gaze, taken aback by Jonathan's big smile cast downward at him. He looked away again.

"It's probably just cause I'm high," He chuckled, leaning into his friend's touch, "I don't know if we could even talk about this sober." The two settled back down into the comfortable position they'd previously been in.

"Why?"

"I don't know," Steve shook his head gently, careful not to knock Jonathan's head, "It's embarrassing."

"Embarrassing?" Jonathan repeated. Steve just murmured in response.

Not as embarrassing as how close they were, apparently. Jonathan laid his head back down, leaving his arm and head sprawled across Steve's chest. Distantly, he felt and heard Jonathan humming along to Runaway by Del Shannon. Steve knew in the back of his mind that... maybe guy friends weren't supposed to be this close to each other, but the atmosphere felt right for it. Any alarm bells that would've been going off in his head were muddled and far away.

So what if Jonathan had made out with his roommate? They could still be close like this, after all it didn't mean anything. They were friends!

It was 1985, what law said a guy couldn't lay in bed with his close friend and get totally baked?

Emboldened by this line of thought, Steve wrapped an arm around Jonathan loosely, just enough to affirm their current position without pulling them too closely together.

"Did you ever do this with your roommate?" Steve snickered, expecting Jonathan to laugh along with him. When he didn't, Steve nudged him playfully, "Hey, I'm just messing with you, man."

"Very funny." Jonathan deadpanned, and Steve could tell he was

probably rolling his eyes.

They sat in silence long after the tape ended, so long that Steve almost thought Jonathan had fallen asleep. He could hear crickets and cicadas chirping outside, and dared himself to look at the clock to see how late it was. Finally Steve turned, blinked back at the red numbers on his alarm clock. 1:23 AM. *Great.*

“Hey, Jonathan...” He said it cautiously, like a question.

“Hmm?” Jonathan murmured, shifting so he could look at Steve. Steve looked down at his friend, figuring it wasn’t going to get much weirder than this, and decided to risk it. Decided to ask the question he’d been thinking about ever since Jonathan told him about that kiss with his roommate.

Jonathan’s eyes were bloodshot and he was blinking slowly, telling Steve all he needed to know about how exhausted his friend was.

“I know you told me not to ask about it anymore, but I was just...”

“Just what?” Jonathan’s voice had an edge to it, as if he could sense what Steve was about to bring up. Maybe he could, as it seemed to be a subject of conversation every time they saw each other.

“I was wondering...” Steve paused before shaking his head, backing off of this dangerous path while he still could, “Forget it, I don’t wanna bother you with this.”

“Well you might as well tell me now.” Jonathan sighed, detangling himself from Steve and sitting up on the bed. His hair was wild and he slowly combed his fingers through it, attempting to break up the matted tangles.

Steve addressed his question to the window, “Had you ever thought about experimenting before you kissed your roommate?”

“What do you mean?” He heard shifting on the bed, no doubt Jonathan turning to face him. Steve didn’t return his gaze, determined not to lose his nerve this time.

He’d been trying to ask this question ever since they first had this

conversation, but he didn't know how to do it sober. He didn't have the vocabulary for these kinds of talks, but now, all consequences seemed far away. Steve was certainly nervous, but he was also sure that Jonathan wouldn't be as offended by the question after smoking two joints and listening to that 60's tape. Steve had effectively wooed him, got him comfortable. *He's not as defensive as that night he came back*, Steve reasoned, *he's probably more likely to give you a real answer.*

"Like, back in high school, did you ever think about..." Steve cleared his throat before looking in Jonathan's direction, looking everywhere but his face, "Uh, kissing boys?"

The hand detangling his hair stopped, came to rest by his side, "Well I..." Jonathan began, before looking down at his own hands, "I guess so, yeah." His tone was like a confession, just above a whisper.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about it?"

Jonathan furrowed his brows, looking genuinely confused by Steve's question, "Well I... I didn't want you to..." He stammered, pulling a loose thread from the sleeve of his sweater, "Well, I didn't know how you would react to it is all." Jonathan punctuated the statement with a shrug, trying to appear cool and collected, but it wasn't fooling Steve.

"I don't even know what I would've said back then." Steve still didn't know what to say, actually, now that Jonathan *actually* kissed a guy. The point was, he couldn't get it out of his head, it was less like Steve was disgusted and more like he was disgusted... for not being immediately turned off by the idea. He didn't know what it meant, why at the thought of it his eyebrows would furrow together and his heart would race, was it disgust? Was it desire? Steve didn't know, but he figured Jonathan might.

Jonathan nodded, leaning back against the headboard again, "Well I also just didn't want to seem like..." He paused, looking down at his lap again before continuing, "A pervert, or whatever."

The way Jonathan said it almost broke his heart. He said it defensively, like he was poised to be called a freak, but more than

that, Jonathan said the word just like the first time *Steve* had said it.

“Oh...” He hung his head, looking down at his lap and avoided eye contact.

The words Jonathan and Steve exchanged when they'd hated each other turned out to carry a lot of weight after they became friends. Even though both boys had come a long way from fighting in an alley and talking shit about each other, there were still pieces of their shared history neither of them wanted to go over again. For Jonathan to reference it now in his own subtle way was very telling.

“Well, things are different now.” Steve replied, trying his best to sound forgiving, “I would never think that of you.” He nodded at him, giving him a consoling pat on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I know.” Jonathan nodded, “We've both changed.” His tone sounded forgiving too, and Steve hoped he wasn't reading too much into it.

“Hey, did you uh...” Steve said slowly, drawing his hand back and schooling his voice to sound nonchalant, “Did you ever think about...”

“About what?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, nothing.” Steve's head felt clouded, and he still wasn't sure this was a good conversation to have, no matter how stoned they both were.

“What, like about us kissing?” Jonathan looked over, his face giving nothing away. Steve felt like the wind had been knocked out of him, but all he could hear his mind saying was a chorus of *yes*.

He opened and closed his mouth, surprised by how blunt Jonathan had been. Eventually, Steve just chuckled nervously to fill the silence, looking down at his own hands and sitting up a little straighter. “It's stupid. I know you said to stop asking about it, but I just...”

“It's not stupid.” Jonathan replied, his voice reassuring but firm. He was giving Steve a strange look, one that looked almost sinister in the near dark. “I guess sometimes... I did think about asking you.”

“*Really?*” Steve exclaimed before quickly checking his enthusiasm so as not to startle his friend, “I mean... Why didn’t you?”

“Well, you were dating Nancy, at the time,” Jonathan smiled over at him, “You guys were pretty crazy about each other.” There was that reassuring voice again, soft and sweet Jonathan Byers being endlessly understanding even when he was catching Steve by surprise. It was too much for him.

“Yeah, we were.” Steve smiled back bashfully, remembering fondly the days when the only thing that was on his mind was when he was going to see her next.

He really had been crazy about Nancy, still was honestly, but his feelings had transformed since then. After she’d gone off to school, they’d really tried to hold it together, but being states away didn’t lend itself very well to a good relationship. Predetermined times to call were missed, letters were left unanswered, and over the course of a semester Steve had had a series of little heartbreaks over both Nancy *and* Jonathan leaving him. He still wasn’t even sure where he stood now, he was constantly caught between wanting to be mad at them and undeniably loving them just as much as he had last summer. Didn’t they absence made the heart grow fonder? Steve wasn’t sure what had happened over these past months, it was heavy, and he had tried to avoid confronting it until now.

“Also because we’re such good friends.” Jonathan added quickly, rousing Steve from his thoughts.

“What?” He shook his head and blinked rapidly, having some trouble coming back down to earth.

“That’s why I never mentioned kissing, because it would’ve been kind of weird, right?” Jonathan laughed, but it was forced and nervous.

“Sure, yeah.” Steve nodded and shrugged, “It would’ve been weird back then.”

Jonathan nodded, looking at him thoughtfully. His gaze was scrutinizing, and it made Steve nervous.

“What?” He asked, leaning against the headboard and looking back at him, “What’s that look?”

Jonathan was silent, eventually clearing his throat before he spoke.

“Were you *ever* curious?”

The question took him by surprise, as Steve had been the one doing the heavy questioning that night. He distantly felt his fingers twitch, his hands suddenly weighing a ton in his lap as he tried to distract himself. Steve laughed again; it sounded just as forced as Jonathan’s.

“I guess...” He began, unsure of *what* exactly the answer was. Eventually, he settled for evasiveness, “Who isn’t a little bit curious, right?”

“Now *you’re* not answering the question.” His tone was solemn in contrast to the ghost of a smile that lingered on his lips.

“I...” Steve swallowed around the lump in his throat, suddenly feeling it hard to breathe, “Yeah, I guess I... You know.” He shrugged, flapping his hand vaguely in the air between them. He didn’t know what to say. What *could* he say?

Jonathan’s eyebrows furrowed, and he scooted a little closer to Steve, “So, you’ve thought about it?”

“Well, I...” Steve darted his eyes back and forth before looking at Jonathan’s eyebrows in lieu of eye contact. “I...” He suddenly felt very small, aware of how little he’d actually considered his own thoughts and feelings, even back then.

What friend is obsessed with the details of another friend’s one time homosexual encounter? What friend kept himself up wondering about fantasies of another man? Jonathan had only kissed a guy one time, so why was Steve so obsessed with it? Was it because he *was*... Curious? Even the word made him shiver. Steve didn’t know what he wanted, but in a way, he thought he did...

“It’s okay, Steve.” Jonathan whispered, patting his hand, “It’s okay to be curious. Are you?”

Steve nodded, looking down at their hands touching, his stomach feeling like a ball of nerves.

“Yes?” Jonathan put his hand on Steve’s shoulder, shaking him gently, “You are...?”

Steve looked up, studying his friend’s face for any judgement or disgust, “Yeah...” He said it so meekly, so quietly, he didn’t even know how Jonathan heard him, but he must’ve because he nodded and looked away as though he were thinking of what to say next.

“I’m sorry...” Steve pulled back, shaking his head, “Do you...” He was scared of where they were going, but his admission had seemed to propel them past some invisible line they couldn’t come back from. Steve wanted to cry, but he blinked rapidly, not wanting to halt any of the proceedings. What did he have to lose? The admission of his curiosity brought as much relief as it did shame, and Steve just wanted to quiet his traitorous feelings once and for all. Maybe if he could just see what it was all about, he’d be able to not feel so... Incomplete. *If it had to be with anyone* , Steve reasoned, *it should be with Jonathan.*

“Do you want me to...” Jonathan slowly moved his hand from Steve’s shoulder to his cheek, cupping it softly. Jonathan was looking at his lips, his gaze pitying and calm. “If you’re curious, can I?” And he asked it so softly, like nothing earth shattering was happening right now. Steve’s breath hitched, but he nodded. Jonathan looked at him closely, studying him for any hesitation, before leaning in. Steve eye’s fluttered closed.

If he had been feeling breathless just talking about kissing, the kiss itself only magnified that experience. Jonathan knew what he was doing, which was surprising considering both of their dating histories but despite Steve’s prior experience kissing, he let Jonathan take the lead at first, choosing to observe before diving in. Steve laid back, head crashing against his pillow as Jonathan deepened the kiss, the pad of his thumb swiping against his cheek in soft semicircles. Jonathan wasted no time parting Steve’s lips with his tongue, and Steve obliged him with a soft groan from the back of his throat. The sensation was simultaneously foreign and familiar, and all Steve was wondering was why he hadn’t asked to do this sooner.

As much as Steve was enjoying kissing his friend, he also didn't really know what to do. It wasn't totally unlike kissing Nancy, Jonathan was even doing a lot of the same little ministrations Nancy would do sometimes, but he didn't know what *he* was supposed to do in return aside from let himself be kissed. Kissing Nancy had been like a trading of power dynamics, one person would lead, and the other would *be kissed* and they'd switch all throughout . Now, Steve was just overthinking everything, terrified he'd do something wrong and Jonathan would pull away. After all, he knew what girls liked guys to do while kissing, but he wasn't sure what Jonathan liked.

First, Steve had had his hands by his side but that had seemed too frigid, then he'd tried to wrap his arms around Jonathan's waist but it'd ended up tangling them together and making things awkward. Eventually, he settled on resting one hand by his side and one in Jonathan's hair, clenching and unclenching as Jonathan's actions merited.

The kiss, for all its passion, ended tragically soon when Jonathan came up for air. Steve panted almost in time with him, both of their lips red and shining. Their faces were still incredibly close together. Steve was mesmerized, he couldn't look away. Jonathan was looking too, but his gaze seemed to be searching, roaming up and down his body. Steve tried to search for some shame he knew should be accompanying what they were doing, but he was coming up empty. His mind, for once, was completely clear.

"You're going to be so tired at work tomorrow." Jonathan rolled his eyes and shook his head, feigning disbelief. He pulled back a little more until he was sitting up again, and the atmosphere changed back into the friendly one they'd had earlier that evening.

Steve smiled, feeling his face heat up, "I know." He cleared his throat and sat up himself, shivering at the cold air that had crept in from the window. "Maybe you should-"

"Yeah, I probably should head out." Jonathan stretched, several of his joints popping faintly before he stood up, "You need to get your beauty sleep." Steve couldn't stop watching that smile.

"Hey, I think I'm all covered on beauty sleep," He yawned, getting up

to shut the window, “But yeah, I’m going to be shredded tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.” Jonathan frowned, “Next time we won’t stay up so late, okay?”

The possibility of a next time made Steve’s heart race all over again, and it was all he could do to just nod.

“And I won’t tell anyone about...” Jonathan gestured between the two of them, the implication obvious, “I promise. It’s just between you and me.”

“Right.” Steve nodded curtly, “It was just...”

“Curiosity,” Jonathan supplied, “Which is totally normal.”

“Yeah.” Steve agreed, rubbing his eyes, which felt heavy with exhaustion. He really had stayed up too late, but he almost didn’t care. He was just glad things were okay. They had kissed, but Jonathan hadn’t run for the hills or called him queer or anything. It was just a kiss, it didn’t mean anything about either of them. Maybe it really wasn’t wrong, and the fact that they could still talk like this was proof of it.

Both boys tiptoed down the stairs, careful not to wake Steve’s parents to avoid rehashing what had happened earlier. Out on the front porch they still kept their voices low, the cold air transforming their hot breath into a puff of white mist.

“I did have a good time, despite...” Jonathan gestured up at the house, “You know.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed easily, “It was good.”

Something about kissing each other had cause them to switch places, the usually reserved Jonathan extremely chatty and Steve quieting down, too tired and too high to say anything else.

“I’m glad.” Jonathan smiled, looking over at his car, which was still parked in the driveway before looking back to Steve, “Well I better go. Talk tomorrow, maybe?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Steve shrugged, “I get off around five or so.” He repeated the information as though Jonathan didn’t already know that, falling into their standard goodbyes naturally.

“Cool...” Jonathan nodded slowly, looking down before moving a couple steps closer to Steve, “See you later, Steve. Thanks for hangin’ out with me.” He punctuated the statement with a fast peck on the cheek before quickly walking back to his car. Steve blinked rapidly, limply waving goodbye and going in before Jonathan had even finished pulling out of the driveway.

He didn’t recall closing the door, or even walking back up the stairs, only his head hitting the pillow as he fell into a leaden sleep.

7. Chapter 7

It was only four days until Christmas, and Nancy had just gotten out of the shower when Steve called. He tried not to back out then and there, still feeling somewhat ashamed of calling like this.

“ Steve? ” She’d said incredulously, caught off guard by his sudden call. “What’s up?”

Steve supposed it was reasonable for her to be surprised; he’d seen her a couple times when she had come back into town, but this was the first time he’d called her since... Well, since him and Jonathan had kissed. It had been about a week or so since he’d talked to anyone, and whether or not Nancy knew why, the radio silence was palpable.

“Hey...” Steve replied, trying not to sound like he was guilty of something, “How’s it going?”

Nancy seemed put off by his small talk, as Steve was usually the type of person to get straight to the point. “Good...” She said slowly, her voice calculating as she tried to predict his reasons for calling. He decided to get right to the point.

“Look, do you wanna hang out tomorrow? I’ve just...” Steve paused, looking down at his feet and gripping the phone tightly, “I’ve just gotta see you.” He cringed internally at how pleading his voice sounded.

There was a pause on the line, the sound of Nancy thinking, and Steve’s heart sank with the impending rejection. He was working out how he’d smoothly get out of the call when Nancy surprised him:

“I was going to call you actually.” Her tone was businesslike, but friendly.

“Really?” Steve brightened significantly, not feeling so intrusive after all.

Nancy murmured a vague noise of affirmation before she continued,

"I have to do some last minute christmas shopping in the city and I didn't wanna go alone. You know how the city is..."

"Right," He chuckled softly, his smile coming easily and unabashedly.

"We could do that, then grab dinner?"

"That sounds perfect," Steve agreed quickly, trying not to sound too desperate and failing miserably, "What time?"

"What time do you get off work?" He could hear her shifting on the bed, no doubt cradling the phone in between her cheek and her shoulder.

This was just what he'd been searching for when he called. Their planning felt familiar, the first dose of normalcy he'd had since that kiss. Steve let out a small sigh of relief.

"I get out around five, so I'll probably be at your place at 5:30? That okay?"

"Yeah, that'll work." Another audible pause seemed to fill the line, perhaps a space where they'd exchange I-love-you's, but no words came from either end. Neither of them wanting to break the invisible barrier college had placed between them.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then." Steve chuckled nervously, making it sound more like a question than a statement, and they said their goodbyes without further issue.

After that particularly brief phone call Steve flopped back on his bed, picking apart and analyzing the conversation for any signs that he'd said anything to give him away. Eventually, with a big sigh, Steve reasoned he was probably in the clear. Besides, it wasn't like anything he'd said had been a lie. Steve really *did* want to see Nancy, but what if she knew, somehow, about what he and Jonathan had done? He'd said he wouldn't tell anyone about the kiss, but Nancy was an expert at getting secrets out of people. If Jonathan had told anyone, it would be her. What if Nancy didn't actually have any christmas shopping to do, she just wanted an excuse to ambush him? Steve couldn't handle the questions his own mind thought up, he

knew he'd be doubly screwed if Nancy came at him with a line of questioning about what he'd been up to.

He shook his head, quickly realizing how frenzied his thought pattern had become.

After that night with Jonathan, Steve had schlepped into work, exhausted but alive. He hadn't even given himself the chance to think about that kiss until Saturday, nearly two days later.

Steve had been paranoid ever since it had happened, completely cutting himself off from everyone. That Saturday, Steve had feverishly chain smoked cigarettes, flicking the ashes on the back porch and wondering where he was supposed to go from here.

He started taking lunch breaks in his car, parked as far from the other cars as possible and taking quick, hurried drags before returning to the mail room. If he had been a hermit before, he was even more of one now.

Steve just couldn't shake the feeling that people would just *know* somehow, that they'd see it on him like they'd see a bad haircut or a stained shirt. He'd even looked in the mirror right after it had happened, his hair askew and face red, looking what could only be described as debauched. Steve had been high but kissing Jonathan had sobered him up pretty fast. Looking in the the mirror that night, through the haziness, he was sure something about him had changed.

Once, Steve was pretty sure Jonathan had called him. Both of his parents were away, on some vacation to exotic locations he couldn't even pronounce, and yet the phone had been ringing all day. Who else could it be? Nancy? Someone else? Steve didn't answer it once, just stared at the phone before he worked up the nerve to unplug it.

He didn't want to talk to anyone, at least not until he figured some things out. His mind was full of doubt, shame, fear. Steve was afraid if he opened his mouth, everything on his mind would just come pouring out, and he could not have that. Besides, what could he have said if it really *were* one of his friends calling? Hey guys, I can't come talk right now because I'm currently having a crisis, talk some other time!

Steve thought experimenting would've quieted the questions, but it only opened a can of worms he'd been ignoring for years.

Was he queer now? Had he always been? Steve was stuck with two conflicting ideas, one being that he loved girls, loved being with Nancy, and the other being that he undeniably enjoyed kissing Jonathan. Was that possible? Did he have to choose? No one in Hawkins talked about this kind of stuff, and even if they did, Steve wasn't sure he'd even want to admit these feelings to anyone.

There were moments when he got close to an answer. Right on the edge of sleep, he'd let out a sigh before slowly slipping into unconsciousness and reason that maybe he *could* just... like them both. However, that thought never seemed to hold much weight in the morning, when Steve fully grasped the concept of liking men just as much as liking women. *That's not me*, he'd convince himself in the morning, *you're just confused*. With that, the cycle of fear and doubt would start all over.

The idea to see Nancy was partially because she was the only other friend in town that Steve didn't have weird feelings about, but it was also just because he was so bored. Enough had to be enough at some point. Steve was getting tired of sitting around his house, stuck in his own head. In addition to that, Nancy was probably one of the only people who knew Jonathan just as much as Steve knew him. It was enough for him to get over the potentially awkward situation of telling his former(?) girlfriend he'd kissed their best friend because after all, if anyone would know what to make of this, it'd be Nancy Wheeler.

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When Steve pulled into the Wheeler's driveway Nancy was already sitting on her porch, kicking at some pebbles with her feet. He honked the horn, grinning when she startled at the sound. Nancy shot him a wry grin as she got into the car, and Steve felt a lot like he was picking her up for a date. The idea made him just as nervous as he'd been back in high school, and he took a deep breath to steady himself.

"Happy Holidays, Steve Harrington," Nancy greeted him, strapping

the seat belt and shooting another grin his way. She was still the same beautiful girl he'd fallen for back in high school, at least that would never change.

"Hey there, Nancy Wheeler." Steve replied warmly, smiling as he backed out of her driveway and onto the road.

"You ready to deal with these crowds?" He asked, glancing over her before looking back to the road, "Where did you want to go, anyway?"

"I wanted to go to the Benetton up there," Nancy said, rolling her eyes in anticipation for the last minute shoppers that would be flocking to the store in droves. "I *know* it's so last minute, I just got... distracted."

Distracted with what, Steve wanted to ask, but he refrained from being too nosy. Instead, he merely hummed in response, nodding and tapping his fingers against the steering wheel nonchalantly. If he started poking around her life, Nancy would start poking around his. That was just the sort of thing that Steve was trying to avoid.

"The Benetton at the Circle Centre Mall, right?" He said instead, though he knew that was the closest Benetton to Hawkins, and not to mention the one he'd been to the most with Nancy when they were in high school. With her sitting beside him in the passenger seat, it hit Steve all at once just how much of hermit he'd really become this past week or so.

"Yeah, the one I got my graduation dress from, remember?"

"Yeah I remember where that is," He replied with a slow nod, struck by the memory Nancy had conjured, "I've gotten a couple shirts from there."

As silence filled the cab of the car, Steve couldn't help but remember that graduation dress she was referring to. It had been a last minute choice, something pulled off the rack amidst the chaos of high school graduation planning, but you wouldn't know it by how well it suited her. It had almost been more beautiful than her prom dress, the way that maroon satin had hugged her frame. In the most surprising way,

it had matured her look. The day they graduated Hawkins High, Nancy really *had* looked like the scholar that had gotten accepted to nearly every school she'd applied to. Steve had noticed it suddenly, right after they'd thrown their caps into the air and she'd shot him a triumphant grin, that Nancy Wheeler had become an adult before his eyes. For the rest of the afternoon, he'd been beaming proudly at her, the giddiness of graduation having not given way to fear of the future just yet.

It was entirely possible that he was more sentimental about the graduation dress than anything because he was barely sober for the duration of prom, but it had also been one of the last times they'd all gotten dressed up for a school function, and Nancy looking beautiful that day had been icing on the cake.

He wondered if she still had the dress, if she even thought of it at all.

"So..." Nancy said, stirring Steve from his thoughts, "Where've you been?" Her voice was edging on cautious; she must've known she was toeing a careful line.

Steve chuckled nervously, rapidly tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and focusing on following the route to the mall, "Who me?" He scoffed, turning on the radio as a subtle way to change the subject.

Nancy had always hated radio commercials. She'd usually insist on playing a tape or something, but if that wasn't an option she'd simply rail against the advertisements, rolling her eyes at every corny jingle and mocking every obnoxious disc jockey. It was Steve's hope that by turning on the radio he could distract her with a particularly annoying ad. He crossed his fingers and hoped for a Stanley Steemer one - the jingle that always annoyed her the most. He was out of luck today though, as the radio station wasn't playing complete junk for once.

"Fleetwood Mac," Steve commented absentmindedly as he turned up the volume a little. Nancy nodded slowly from the passenger seat, looking deep in thought.

"I was starting to wonder if I was going to hear from you before I went back," She continued, turning down the radio a bit. *Shit*, Steve

thought nervously, *did Jonathan tell her something?*

“When do you go back?” He asked evasively, refusing to look back at her.

“Around mid-january.”

Steve chuckled, “Well I was definitely going to see you before *then*. ” He looked over at Nancy, her concerned expression was unwavering.

“So what were you doing that was so important you couldn’t answer any calls?” She sounded calm, if a bit subdued. Steve tensed, willing his hands to not tighten around the steering wheel.

Any calls, he noticed, *not just hers*. Nancy and Jonathan had definitely talked. Steve tried his best to quash down any anxiety that threatened to spill over. Maybe Nancy didn't know anything about the kiss, maybe she and Jonathan had just talked about how reclusive he'd gotten and *that* was enough to warrant an intervention.

Well, not for Steve it wasn't.

“I guess...” He sighed dramatically, fluttering his eyelashes and looking out the driver’s side window, “I guess I just ignored you to make you madly jealous.” Steve looked over at Nancy again, his tone flat but his eyebrows raised comically.

“That's it, that's what it was.” She let out a dry chuckle before looking down at her hands, clasped and folded in her lap.

“Well, you don't have to tell me what's wrong.” Nancy added after a pause, her voice just as warm as when they'd been joking around, but she seemed just as uncomfortable as Steve felt.

Steve nodded and cleared his throat, “O-okay.” His voice trembled just slightly, nearly giving him away.

Nancy sighed softly, turning to look out the passenger side window. At the next red light, Steve turned to look at her.

“So, uh... What were you looking to buy at the mall?” He asked awkwardly, unsure of where to take the conversation from there. She

looked over at him, studying his face before suddenly furrowing her eyebrows together and looking down at the radio.

“*Ugh!*” Nancy exclaimed disgustedly, making him jump, “I’d almost forgotten about these ads!” She turned up the ad, sucking her teeth snidely and shaking her head. Steve laughed, listening to whatever ad was bothering her now. Just as he predicted, it was a Stanley Steemer one.

“Why are you turning the ad *up* if you hate it so much?” He chuckled, unable to contain the dopey grin that threatened to split his face.

“It’s just...” She shook her head and rolled her eyes, “It *bothers* me.”

As the jingle ended and another commercial began, Nancy pinched the bridge of her nose, feigning annoyance.

“Oh what is it, Nancy Wheeler?” Steve laughed, peeking glances at her between looking at the road, “They don’t have radio ads in Chicago?” He heard her giggling from the passenger seat. Steve didn’t regret this at all.

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Just as they’d expected, the mall was bustling with last minute shoppers frantically hunting for bargains. Steve and Nancy weaved through crowd after crowd, looking for the Benetton at the north end of the mall.

“It’s funny,” Nancy said, straining her voice to be heard over the crowd of people, “How many times have we been here and I still can’t remember where the Benetton is?” She punctuated the statement by taking Steve’s hand, which caught him almost entirely off guard. He furrowed his brows, looking to her for an explanation, but she just smiled serenely back at him as though nothing were out of the ordinary. In a way, nothing *was* out of the ordinary with Nancy taking his hand. Steve tried to remind himself that he had actually dated her, it hadn’t been a fever dream, and while he wasn’t sure exactly where they stood now, holding hands wasn’t out of the realm of their relationship. In fact, holding Nancy’s hand again felt like coming home, and Steve couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt

that kind of comfort from her. Maybe this didn't have to be weird, maybe it didn't have to be *anything*. For a moment, their shared history didn't even matter, they were just two good friends holding hands in a crowded mall.

"So what were you looking for again?" Steve asked when they finally arrived at the Benetton, eyes darting back and forth across the crowded store. He had assumed Nancy was going to let go of his hand once they got there in order to shop more efficiently, but that didn't happen. Instead of letting go, she pulled him along with her, dragging both of them further into the store as Steve tried his best to keep up.

"I'm just gonna get a nice sweater for my mom," Nancy said, stepping over a mess of pants that had been knocked off their hangers.

Steve marveled at the crowds mercilessly combing through the store's inventory, with little regard for the mess they made or the exhaustion of the store employees. *The holidays must be brutal on those who work retail*, Steve thought with a small shudder.

"This place is a mad house, isn't it?" He said, shooting a particularly sympathetic glance in the direction of an employee tasked with reorganizing the wrecked store.

"Yeah, definitely." Nancy replied absentmindedly, scanning the women's section with her eyebrows furrowed in concentration. It was true that Nancy Wheeler was all business when it was required of her, and now was no different. Steve smiled down at her, feeling oddly fond of how studiously she handled even mundane tasks like this. Even though the mall was kind of a nightmare, he couldn't think of one place he'd rather be right now than here, stepping over knocked down displays and scrounging for a last minute gift. Steve squeezed her hand a little, feeling that same tug of possessive affection he felt for her back in high school. Nancy shot him an easy smile and squeezed back.

Things slowed down a bit once they found the corner of the store with the most sweaters. Nancy finally let go of Steve, using both of her hands to briskly flip through the clothing rack. He winced inwardly as the hangers squeaked loudly, scraping against the metal

racks.

“So why’d you wait this long to get a sweater for your mom?” Steve asked, following closely behind her as she browsed.

“I don’t know...” Nancy sighed, tousling her hair before turning to face him, “I got Mike and Holly their presents in Chicago, and my Dad just wants fishing rods every year, but my Mom...” She shrugged again, starting the search over at another rack of sweaters.

Steve nodded, completely aware of how picky Karen Wheeler could be. Nancy used to tell him all about how secretly unsatisfied her mother was with everything around her, a secret unbeknownst to everyone in the family but her. Even though Christmas should’ve been a time of happiness, the holiday season was only a source of stress with Nancy always wondering what it would take this year to get her mother’s smile to reach her eyes.

“She hates everything we get her,” She used to tell him, “But I’m the only one who notices that little look in her eye.”

Steve wasn’t surprised to hear nothing had changed, he was only sorry that Nancy was still dancing around her mother’s approval as an adult. In a way, it was comforting to realize that family problems didn’t disappear once you headed off to college, but in another way it was incredibly demotivating. He could tell Nancy didn’t exactly miss certain parts of Hawkins, and the realization sat in his gut like a ton of bricks. Steve wished he could save her from all of that, but most of all he wished he was still naive enough to believe that his love could save anyone. *If that was how the world really worked* , Steve mused, *then maybe all of them would be saved by now.*

His stomach lurched.

Even Jonathan?

Steve didn't answer himself.

“Okay, this will work I guess.” She said, pulling a plum cashmere sweater off the rack, “She’s gonna hate whatever I get her anyway, and this is on sale.”

They paid for the sweater and started heading towards the parking garage when Steve decided to do something daring.

“What if this year she falls in love with that sweater?” He asked, smiling teasingly and taking hold of her hand. It was risky, and Steve had been terrified that Nancy would’ve pulled away, but luckily for him she didn’t.

Instead, she just scoffed, “That’d really be a Christmas miracle.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Steve said, breaking away from Nancy to hold the door open for her, “I don’t even know if my family is doing Christmas this year.”

“What?” She asked incredulously, turning around to face him, “Really?”

“Yeah, I...” Steve opened and closed his mouth before giving a small nod.

A gust of wind blew through, causing them both to shiver and button up their coats. Nancy grabbed hold of Steve again, the warmth of her hand comforting against the crisp December air.

“They always give me cash anyway,” He said after a brief pause, “Plus I think they’re going to the caribbean this year anyway, so...” Steve shrugged, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“They’re going to the caribbean on Christmas without you?” Nancy’s indignant tone surprised him more than anything. She knew how shitty his parents could be, and yet she still seemed surprised to hear that they were pulling the same old bullshit they’d pulled in high school.

“Well, they asked if I wanted to go, and I said no.” Steve shrugged again, trying to let her know he was really okay, “We’re supposed to have like some family dinner before they leave or something.”

“I can’t believe... I mean...” Nancy sputtered, shaking her head, “You seem really calm about all this.”

“I...” Steve began, before trailing off. He didn’t quite know what to

say to that, all he could do was nod and look down at their feet, listening to the way their footsteps echoed in the parking lot. Truthfully, he wasn't exactly sure how he felt about his parents skipping out on Christmas. At this point, the holiday was more of a formality they all played along with because it felt wrong not to. It wasn't so much that Steve felt bad about it, moreso that he felt bad about... not feeling bad. Now that Christmas was going to be just like every other day, Steve wasn't sure *how* he felt about the holiday that had lost its sentimentality years ago.

"Did you still wanna grab dinner?" He asked, abruptly changing the subject once they got to his car. Steve leaned against the trunk of his car, breaking away from Nancy and feeling his pocket for the pack of cigarettes he knew would be there.

"Yeah, definitely," She replied, leaning closer to Steve and crossing her arms against her chest, "I'm starving."

"You mind if I...?" He trailed off, holding up the cigarette between his fingers questioningly. Nancy nodded, and he lit the cigarette without further problem.

"Can I bum a drag?" She asked after Steve had taken a few himself. He exhaled slowly, raising his eyebrows incredulously and handing over the cigarette.

"Nancy Wheeler, since when do you smoke?" He asked, trying to mask the confusing mixture of awe and adoration in his voice. Steve never thought he'd see her do something like this, not in a million years.

She looked over at him and sighed, exhaling a cloud of smoke and passing the cigarette back to him.

"I-I don't... not really." Nancy furrowed her brows and shook her head, "I mean... I don't know."

Steve passed her the cigarette again, watching in amazement as she took another drag, nervously tousling her hair with her free hand.

It seemed like they'd both been keeping secrets from each other.

"I started doing it after tests," Nancy revealed, passing the cigarette back to him and crossing her arms against her chest, "Some of the other kids in the honors college were doing it so I..." She punctuated the explanation with a small shrug.

"Ah, I see..." Steve replied, nodding slightly and flicking some ash on the ground, "Peer pressure got to you." He shot her a playful grin that she begrudgingly returned.

"I guess so..." Nancy shrugged, crossing her arms and looking down at their feet, "I only had one pack over the whole semester, and even then I gave some to my friends."

"Well, that's not too bad." Steve took his final drag, offering the dwindling cigarette to Nancy, who shook her head. "It's not like you're addicted, like me." He tossed the cigarette on the ground, stomping out the glowing embers and straightening himself up.

They both got into their car, continuing the conversation only when they were both buckled up with the heater cranked up.

"You're not addicted." Nancy said, warming her hands in front of the heater.

"Nancy, I'm pretty addicted." Steve said, a little firmly, "I was about to start getting jittery in the mall cause I haven't had one since this morning."

She glanced over at him then, but Steve couldn't return her gaze. He was too afraid of what he'd see if he looked back, whether it be disappointment or pity, Steve wasn't sure he could handle it.

"I'm like a smokestack." He whispered quietly to himself, letting out a faint chuckle that was far from jovial. Nancy looked away.

It was probably hitting her all at once how things had changed. Smoking wasn't rebellious and sexy like it was back in high school, Steve wasn't coolly taking a drag in an attempt to seduce Nancy into making out behind the bleachers. Now, Steve smoked to stave off anxiety, to keep his hands from shaking. It wasn't really a choice anymore, before he'd even realize it he'd be smoking again. It was

getting worse. The idea of being addicted to something scared him, and then he'd just take another drag anyway.

"Well, I'm trying not to make a habit out of it." She said, but her voice was uncertain, like she wasn't sure if that was entirely the case, "Anyway, where do you want to eat?"

Notes for the Chapter:

theres more on the way obv but i felt like the chapter should end here cause its getting long. hope u enjoyed even tho nothing really happened

Author's Note:

<https://ingridsuperstar.bandcamp.com/album/pure-suburb>